

A PERFORMANCE WITH HISTORY

Fourth Generation of the Beicho Group in Japan

Yoriko Iwata

In his article *Some Japanese Rarities* (TML 40, September 2024) Jeremy Brooker remarked: "It is hoped that these small case-studies will encourage further exploration of Japanese magic lantern performance during the later part of the nineteenth century and the evolving cross-current of ideas between East and West in the Meiji period." This article aims to answer that call by adding a small case study.

It was our great pleasure to have enjoyed *Nishiki Kage-e* on stage this summer. This is the Japanese tradition of magic lantern performance using hand-held *furos* (Japanese lanterns) and back projection. The equipment used (see Fig. 1) is believed to have originated from the period Jeremy Brooker identifies. The *furos* and slides here have two characteristics that are unusual when combined. First, the provenance is unusually clear, tracing back to around 1900; and second, they



1. Danjiro (right) and Keijiro (left) with the *furos* (lanterns) and slides

have been and are still in use for the stage, as recently as a show on 3 August 2025 (Fig. 2).

The *Nishiki Kage-e* equipment belongs to Beicho Office (the official English title of the group). This is one of the largest groups of Kamigata *Rakugo*, a type of Japanese classical traditional entertainment comprising solo narrative recitation, often based on comical stories.¹ Kamigata is an obsolete word for Kansai, the western part of Japan. The Office is named after Beicho Katsura (1925-2015), a legendary Kamigata *Rakugo* storyteller. Each *Rakugo-ka* (*Rakugo* performer) in the group uses Katsura as a 'family' name. Their stage names sometimes change according to progress and promotion into the inherited names with ordinal numbers. The group has performed *Nishiki Kage-e*, though not regularly, for about the last half a century using performers from four generations.

PROVENANCE

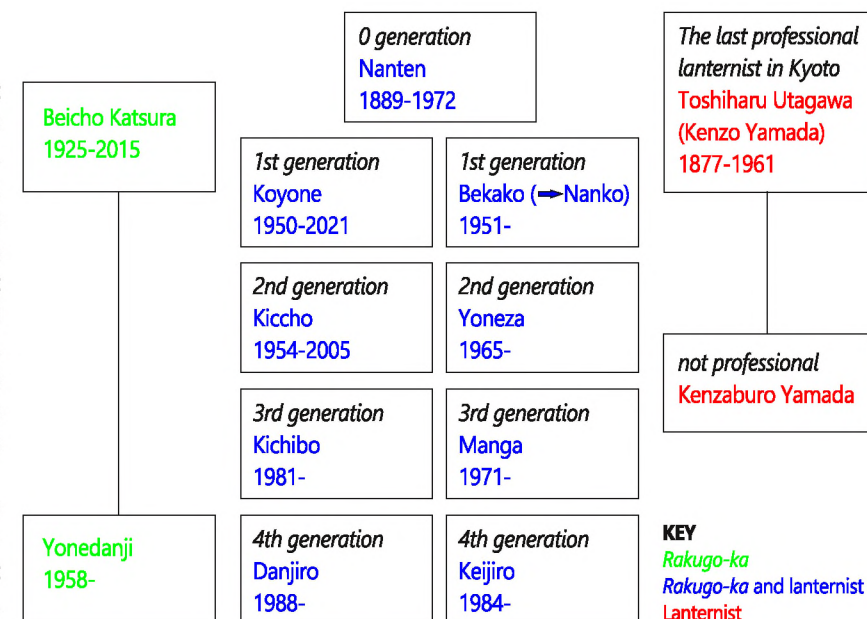
These slides and *furos* once belonged to the last professional lanternist in Kyoto. His stage name was Toshiharu Utagawa (1877-1961, born Kenzo Yamada). Toshiharu acquired his techniques through a master, Tocho Yoshikawa, at a variety theatre *Yuuraku-tei* in his teens and then started his independent career at the age of 23. After a tour mainly around the Chubu district (in the middle part of Japan, not Kansai nor around Tokyo), he stopped performing the shows in 1906. Although he never revealed the reason in detail, as the cinematograph was imported into Japan in 1897 it is generally concluded that the audience migrated to this new attraction from other traditional entertainments.

However, Toshiharu taught his techniques to two people – his son Kenzaburo and Nanten Katsura (1889-1972), a *Rakugo-ka* well known for his dexterity that was comparable to a magician, such as, for example, his quick paper transformations using scissors. This kind of variety act was inserted occasionally between the main *Rakugo* programmes. Genjiro Kobayashi cites a record that shows Nanten collaborated on stage in Osaka with Toshiharu in 1951 and with Kenzaburo in 1959.²

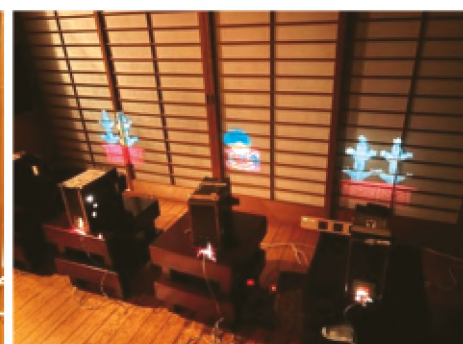
Nanten took over from Toshiharu four *furos* and five sets comprising 35 slides. Kobayashi described a private show by Nanten

4. 'Fukusuke' slide and Mazda lamp (left)

5. Trial projection of opening announcement onto Japanese sliding doors (right)



3. The generations of *Rakugo-ka* and lanternists



江戸時代からの
伝統の技を受け継ぐ
米朝一門が
復活上演

アニメの元祖・錦影絵

桂米朝 生誕百周年特別事業

錦影絵と落語の会

8月3日(日) 開演 13:00 (開場 12:30)

松花堂庭園 別館 1階ギャラリー

全席自由 一般2,800円 (当日3,000円) 学生2,000円 (当日同額)

5月23日(金) 開演開始

チケット 八幡市文化センター 075-971-2111
八幡市立生涯学習センター
ローンチケットコード 534060

お問い合わせ 八幡市文化センター 075-971-2111

主催 (公) 八幡市文化センター (八幡市文化センター) (協力) 米朝事務所

2. Playbill for 3 August 2025



6. 'Sambasou' to purify and celebrate the stage



7. 'A Rabbit Pounding Mochi (rice cake) on the Moon'. The total width of the image section of this slide is about 330 mm

in Osaka in the autumn of 1956.³ He brought two refurbished *furos* in cedar and showed four sets. These were not long stories but short sequences.

When Nanten passed away in 1972, Beicho Office took over the legacy because Beicho himself admired Nanten and understood the importance of projection art.

Toshiharu left the rest of his magic lantern equipment – four *furos* and 47 slides comprising nine sets – to his son Kenzaburo, who also left materials to Beicho Office. This reconciliation meant that the equipment held by Beicho Office could be accurately traced back for more than a hundred years. Fig. 3 shows the generations of performers.

Though Genjiro Kobayashi could not conceal a small amount of disappointment about the quality of the slides by Toshiharu, both in their mechanical operation and artistic merit, the important point is that the slides exist today and are still working. After more than a century, despite their age and some colours fading, they still charm audiences in the 21st century.

SHOWS

On 3 August 2025 the programme *Nishiki Kage-e and Rakugo* started at 1:00 pm. The venue was Shokado, famous for its Japanese-style garden, special pavilions for the tea ceremony and a restaurant well-known for

Shokado Bento (Japanese lunchbox). Shokado is in Yawata City, known for its celebrated shrine, situated between Kyoto and Osaka. All but three of the 80 seats were sold.

To accommodate the required black-out, *Nishiki Kage-e* came first, for about 40 minutes, followed by an interval during which the stage was changed. Then the four *Rakugo-ka* entertained the audience with as many stories. Danjiro and Kejiro, the current fourth-generation lanternists, returned to their professional speciality, *Rakugo*, for this part.

The *Nishiki Kage-e* programme proceeded as follows:

- 'Fukusuke' opening announcement (Figs 4 and 5)
- 'Sambasou' to purify and celebrate the stage (Fig. 6)
- 'A Rabbit Pounding Mochi (rice cake) on the Moon' – lunar pareidolia (imagining an image, e.g. a face) based on a folklore story from eastern Asia (Fig. 7)
- 'Takao: A Farce' based on a well-known *Rakugo* programme, 'Hangonkou' (Fig. 8)
- 'Snow Scenes' (Fig. 9)
- 'Summer Evening on the Okawa River' (Figs 10 and 11)
- 'Flowers in Four Seasons' – cherry blossoms in spring, morning glories in summer, camellia in winter, and maple leaves turning red in autumn (Fig. 12)

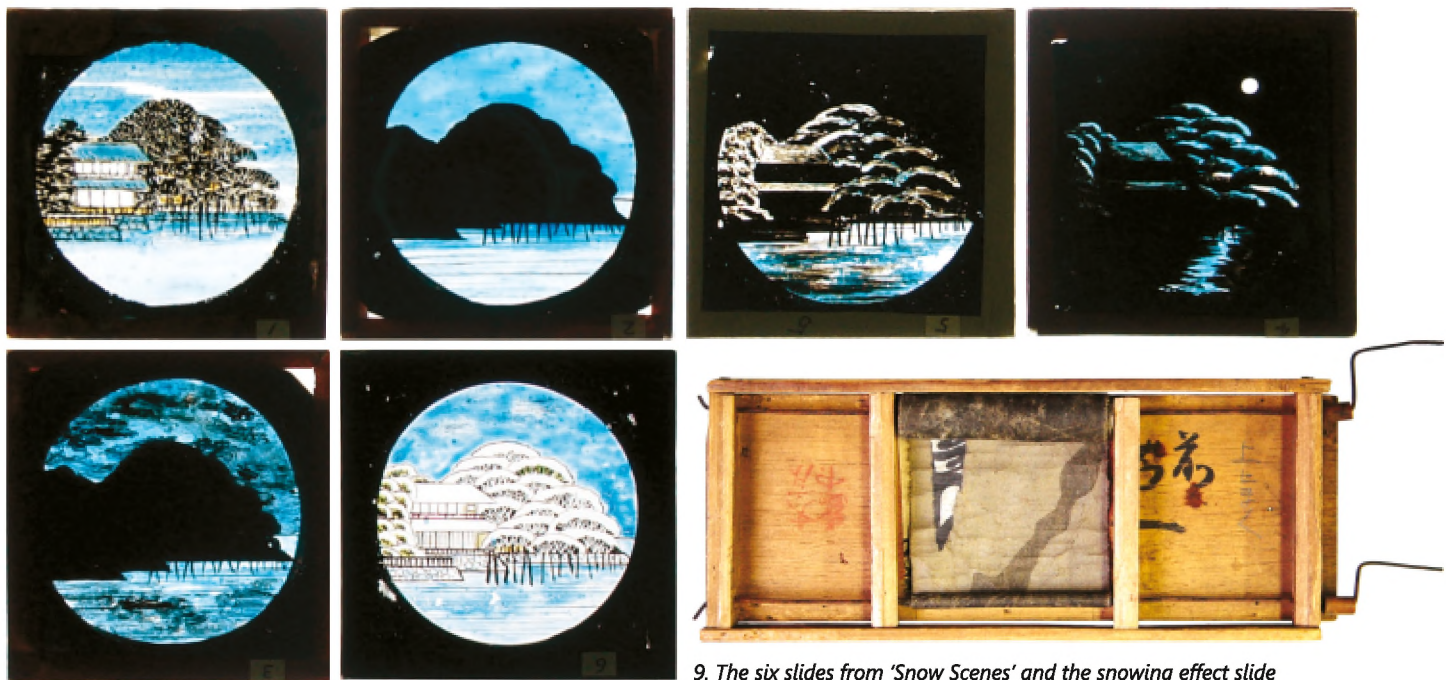
The apparently wrong order in the last item – winter coming before autumn – proves that the effect of maple leaves turning

red is more important in entertaining the audience than nature, science or reality! Except for *Takao* (fourth item) with a story, all the others are a series of mechanical projections.

It was Beicho himself who launched *Nishiki Kage-e* projects in his group because he thought *Nishiki Kage-e* should be included as one of the 'Iromono' ('colourful') variety interludes such as magic acts, ventriloquism, stand-up comedy and

8. 'Takao: A Farce'. The apparition is a crucial point in the projection. This is one of ten slides in the set





9. The six slides from 'Snow Scenes' and the snowing effect slide

so on, in a series of *Rakugos*. To his mind, theatre as a whole should entertain the audience. Beicho asked Nanten and Kenzaburo Yamada (a son of Toshiharu), who owned equipment from Toshiharu Utagawa, to teach these skills to his pupils (members of the group) by saying in encouragement: "If you master these techniques, continue and develop them, then you'll certainly be entitled, most prestigiously, to be living national treasures." The irony of this episode is that Beicho himself, not the lanternists, was officially given the title 'living national treasure' (1996) in the field of *Rakugo*.

One of the first-generation lanternists, Nanko (then called Bekako), confessed that *furos* were hard to manage, so he'd never felt confident, even after about 30 performances. When his own poor eyesight prevented him from performing such delicate work in the darkness, he persuaded the next generation by using the same spell, the promise of being 'living national treasures'.⁴

This phrase has been passed on in the group.⁵ The repertoire has not changed much so far, mainly because of the limited number of original working slides available. They use their Mazda lamps carefully. And now is the time for the fourth generation, Danjiro and Keijiro (see Fig. 1). They are apprentices of Yonedanji, the son of Beicho, and began giving their shows in 2020, when in their thirties. *Nishiki Kage-e* in the Beicho group has been handed down through four generations for



10. 'Summer Evening on the Okawa River'. The 'attractions' on the ship charm the audience

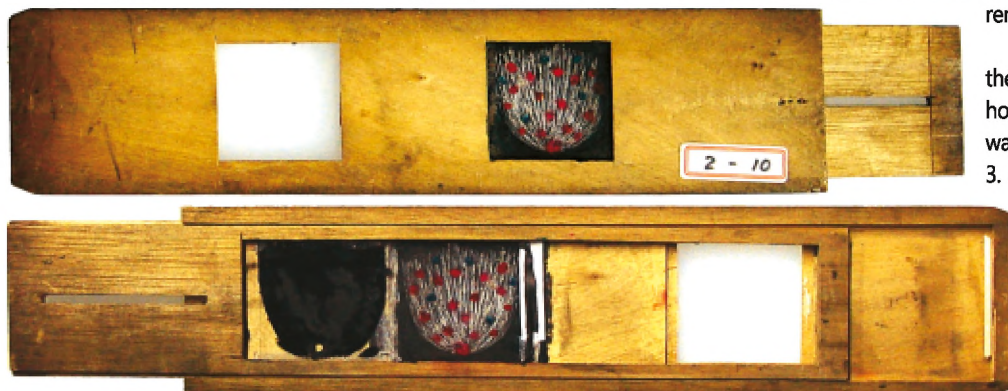
more than half a century. This is the merit of the system having an organised group, centred on the master-pupil relationship that is found in traditional Japanese arts. Last August their polished narratives and familiar classic Japanese music accompaniment produced an enchanting show in the middle of the hottest summer on record. If Beicho was to come back into this world now and see their performance, he would certainly remark that this is the way to become 'living national treasures'.

THE SNOW SCENES

Interestingly, the section called 'Snow Scenes' (the six separate slides in Fig. 9) was originally called not *Nishiki Kage-e* but '*Dai*' (meaning great, grand) '*Gento*' (magic lantern) by Toshiharu Utagawa, as it was used as a remarkable grand finale.

Fig. 13 is an illustrated explanation of the snow slides: 1. A two-storeyed old-style house surrounded by trees just at the waterfront in an evening; 2. Darkness falls; 3. Lights go on inside, then a maid slides the sash windows closed one by one; 4. The moonlight; 5. Snow falls; 6. Morning scene under snow.⁶

You may have noticed that the snow effect slide here is very similar to those found in Britain and elsewhere. The version categorised



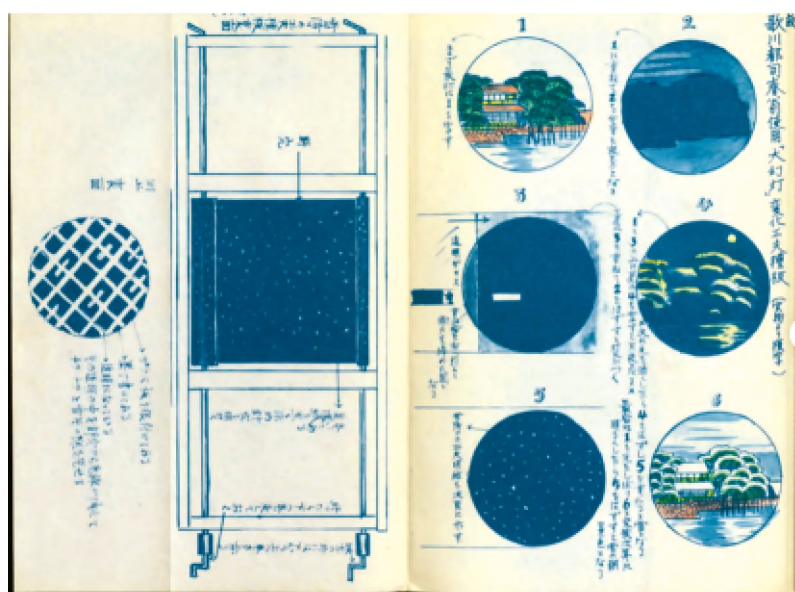
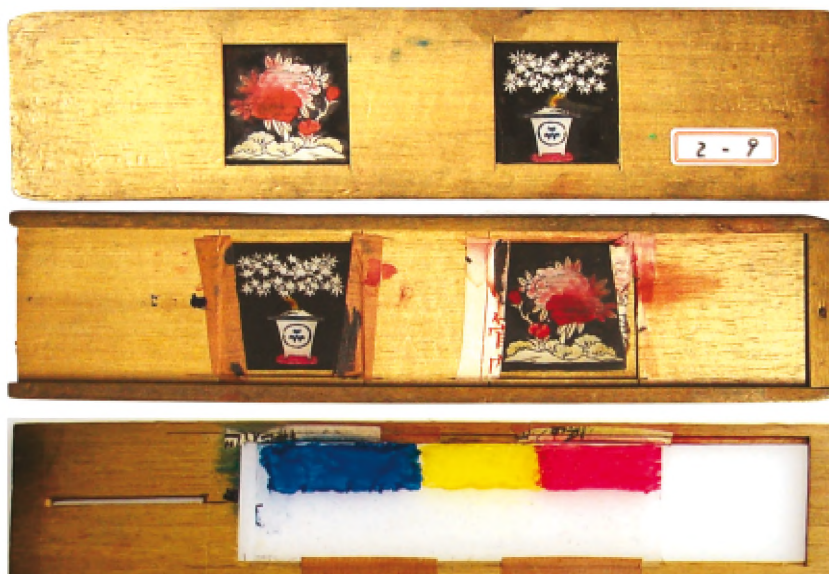
11. Fireworks on the Okawa

12. 'Flowers in Four Seasons'. The slide at the bottom gives the effect of the maple leaves turning red in autumn

as 'T1' by John Barnes was made from pierced black calico and traced back to around 1845.⁷ In the Japanese example, the original slide is made of black, pin-dotted paper. Though the materials may be different, the system is the same.⁸ MLS member Mitsue Ikeda said she herself had made snow effect slides by following such examples without too much difficulty.

My concern is not, of course, to decide which came first. I would like to conclude that this magical effect impressed people in both the East and the West almost at the same time, "during the later part of the nineteenth century ... in the Meiji period" that Jeremy Brooker references.

The author is grateful to the following for granting permission to reproduce images: Beicho Office Figs 1, 2, 6-12; Danjiro Katsura Figs 4 and 5; Sukemasa Shiba Fig. 13.



NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. An example of *Rakugo* with English subtitles can be found at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=MfZ9C31aUgE (retrieved 27 September 2025)
2. Genjiro Kobayashi, *Utsushi-e*, Chuo University Press, Tokyo, 1987, pp. 233-34
3. Ibid., p. 181
4. Yonedanji, the master of the fourth generation, and Nanko (Bekako), from the 1st generation, demonstrate a *furo* and slides at www.youtube.com/watch?v=UYLLcvj2WMw (retrieved 27 September 2025)
5. The Research Committee on *Nishiki Kage-e*, *Reports*, Kamigata Rakugo Society, 2007, p. 12
6. Keiichi Yamamoto, 'Peepshows and Utsushi-e', *Skilled Arts series* (10 volumes), Vol. 8, Hakusuisha, 1982, p. 82
7. John Barnes, 'Classification of Magic Lantern Slides for Cataloguing and Documentation', *Magic Images*, eds Dennis Crompton, David Henry and Stephen Herbert, The Magic Lantern Society, 1990, p. 84
8. 'Snow effect, roller blind', *Encyclopaedia of the Magic Lantern*, eds David Robinson, Stephen Herbert and Richard Crangle, The Magic Lantern Society, 2001, p. 287

13. Explanation of Toshiharu Utagawa's snow slides (Fig. 9) by his son Kenzaburo Yamada, as transcribed in Genjiro Kobayashi, *Utsushi-e* (private edition, 1967)