

## **The Bridge: embodiment of pleasure, enlightenment, guilt, agony and death**

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### **Abstract**

In its many depictions in the ukiyo-e block art of the Japanese Edo era (1603-1868), the bridge has a prominent and iconic position and takes on many layers of meaning. It represents an essential passage in Japanese journeys, real or imagined, historical or contemporary, through the Japanese landscape. Bridges in the paintings of the Edo era artists could represent interruptions in the movements of people between places, as well as facilitators of movements; spaces where people could be monitored, levied and controlled, or corridors that brought people together; causeways towards sexual gratification, or milestones towards sites of pilgrimage. In the long tradition of Japanese concern for the protection of its cultural heritage that has evolved since then, these representations from the Edo era have been able to maintain a physical presence while retaining a place in the memory of that inheritance. From grand bridges to people's bridges, some bridges embody family memories of joy as well as of death, agony and guilt that derive from more recent events and are thus connected to the larger canvas of a community's social and cultural life. For contemporary Japan, the bridge remains both the object of the neurotic and precise application of technical expertise in the process of heritage safeguarding, and a focus of the intangible or non-physical, 'meanings' that constitute heritage. While paying attention to several specific examples, this paper looks at the bridge as an element of Japan's social history and art, and discusses its place in the community that makes the bridge an iconic element of people's heritage.