1994

Ukiyo-e: Japanese Prints of the Floating World

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UKIYO-E
JAPANESE PRINTS OF THE FLOATING WORLD
MARCH 3 TO APRIL 17 1994
MARSH ART GALLERY UNIVERSITY OF RICHMOND
FOREWORD

This *ukiyo-e* exhibition reveals the tantalizing range of images in Japanese prints of the floating world. A seventeenth-century Japanese writer described that world as: "singing songs, drinking wine, and diverting ourselves just in floating, floating... like a gourd with the river current." Reflecting a sense of the world as an ephemeral place of no lasting value, the floating world was an escape from the present into fantasy and pleasure. Hopefully, our exhibition will entice you to pursue your own escape into that floating world.

Organized by the Marsh Art Gallery, the exhibition was co-curated by Robert G. Sawers, Director, Robert G. Sawers Gallery, London, and Stephen Addiss, Tucker-Boatwright Professor in the Humanities and Professor of Art History, University of Richmond. The exhibition was developed as part of an art history course on Japanese prints; Dr. Addiss' students researched and collectively wrote this brochure essay and individually wrote the exhibition's descriptive labels. The students were: Christopher Brown, Benjamin Chadwick, Inga Clough, Amy Dukes, Kristina Furse, Karen Gover, Wynn Housel, Laurie Linder, Edward O'Brien, Pamela Purdy, Elizabeth Rowe, Kirsten Schutt, Myres Tilghman, Eric Townsend, and Jennifer Wilkins.

We extend special thanks to the co-curators and the students involved in this project. Thanks also go to Mr. Sawers for lending the prints for our exhibition. The exhibition was made possible with the generous support of the University of Richmond Cultural Affairs Committee.

Richard Waller
Director, Marsh Art Gallery, University of Richmond

UKIYO-E: JAPANESE PRINTS OF THE FLOATING WORLD

During the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries a new school of artists emerged that created new ideals and aesthetics in Japan. This era is known as Genroku and is marked by the flourishing of a number of new art forms. As Japanese merchants and artisans became more affluent, they strayed from the traditional ways of the samurai class and formed a new type of society in the cities. They particularly patronized the new pleasure districts set aside for theaters, tea-houses, and brothels.

Supported by the new mercantile economy, woodblock prints soon became very popular. They captured the essence of other forms of artistic expression of the time, such as the popular Kabuki and puppet theaters and the highly successful novels of authors such as Saikaku. He produced *ukiyo-zoshi* ("tales of the floating world") that greatly influenced the subject matter of prints, such as descriptions of ideal feminine beauty. This ideal gradually changed from women who were slender, elegant, and refined to a more voluptuous and sensual form of beauty. This is evident in *ukiyo-e* ("prints of the floating world") in which both men and women were portrayed in a more erotic manner than had been previously accepted.

The creation of traditional woodblock prints was a complicated process involving more than one artisan. The procedure began with the artist’s original design. This was sent to the publisher, who oversaw carving and printing of the blocks. At each stage of the process, highly trained artisans contributed their skills to the final product.

Engravers began their profession with long-term apprenticeships; at least ten years were necessary to master the carving techniques. Using various types of chisels, gouges, and knives, an engraver would transfer the artist’s drawing onto a fine-grained board.
of cherrywood and would carve away the areas that would not be printed. For a polychromatic print, separate blocks were used for each color. The primary black-inked block, called the keyblock, provided the main image for the final print, and the color blocks would be carved from preliminary images made from the keyblock. The engraver's task was completed when he finalized the carving with the publisher's, artist's, and censor's seals. Regardless of his own labor, the engraver's signature was not included on the print.

The printer began the final step of the process by grinding fresh ink and colors from blocks of pigment; time and patience were necessary to achieve the finest colors and consistency. He then brushed the ink and colors onto the different blocks. The strong thin paper, made from plant fibers, was cut, sized, and slightly dampened by his assistants. It was then placed on each block in turn, beginning with the keyblock. The printer would rub the paper over each block with a baren, a coil of fiber covered with bamboo skin. Printing would take about two weeks to complete; each print in the process needed to be dried between the applications of the different colors. The finished prints would then be sent to the publisher, who was in charge of their distribution and sale to the public.

The subjects in Japanese prints may be classified as Kabuki actors, geisha and courtesans, erotica, historical and legendary stories, and landscapes. The close affinity between prints and Kabuki was due to both arts reaching the same audience and coming into existence within a fifteen-year period during the first half of the seventeenth century. Ukiyo-e artists produced graphic records of contemporary Japanese life and customs, while the Kabuki stage presented historical and legendary events. Prints of popular actors, such as Danjuro (illustrated, cover), served as reminders of great performances and also as images of the heroes of the new society.

The majority of figure studies in woodblock prints are either actors or portraits of the courtesans of the licensed pleasure quarter of Edo (Tokyo) called the Yoshiwara. The gorgeous apparel and elaborate costumes worn by the beauties appealed strongly to both artists and the buyers of the prints. Courtesans received the highest education, spoke old-fashioned Japanese, were skilled in many arts, and were remarkably refined in their tastes in fashions, hairdos, and conversation. Celebrated as beauties, they are also represented in prints engaged in all sorts of occupations and events.

In the domain of history and legends, Japanese prints exhibit great dramatic power. The scenes are often elaborated from Kabuki plays, but the woodblock artist was not confined to what could be presented upon a stage. By the second quarter of the nineteenth century, however, the most popular subject of prints became landscapes. The attraction of prints by artists such as Hokusai and Hiroshige was that they could show the scenery of Japan while also forming highly idealistic and often lovely designs. These landscape prints came close to Western standards of art, and thus have been more acceptable to many Europeans and Americans than anything else in the art of East Asia. Yet the prints still retain the fascination of their
technique and bold Far Eastern spatial conventions. Hiroshige's most famous prints were done in the mid-1800s. He produced many sets of depictions of the Fifty-Three Stations of the Tokaido, the main highway that connected Kyoto and Edo. This highway rose to prominence at the start of the seventeenth century with the selection of Edo as Japan's military capital. Hiroshige chose the scenes in his prints from a series of sketches he made along the highway in 1832. He depicted images that were unique to the individual stations along the Tokaido, such as the sailing boats at the thirty-first station of Arai (illustrated, inside).

Japanese prints, first exported to Europe and America in the mid-nineteenth century, came to intrigue and influence the art of the Western world. The French Impressionists wished to break free of illusionism, the realistic style that modeled forms to duplicate nature. Japanese prints offered a new way of looking that was unlike anything in Europe at the time. The style was more two-dimensional, with an emphasis upon line, pattern, texture, pure colors, and asymmetrical compositions of scenes from daily life and the world of entertainment. Van Gogh, an avid collector of Japanese prints, copied several in oil, including Hiroshige's Sudden Shower at Atake (in the exhibition), and even compared the Japanese masters to the Greek masters. The effects of the prints can also be seen in the work of other artists such as Manet, Monet, and Degas. The focus of art was shifted from external reality to creative expression, a trend that continues to this day.

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Dimensions are in inches, height precedes width. All the works are woodblock prints and are lent courtesy of Robert G. Sawers Gallery, London.

Hiroshige (1797-1858)
Four from the Chuban series
Fifty-Three Stations of the Tokaido, 6 1/2 x 9 each
Snow, Shizukuri at Iki, from the series Famous Places in the Sixty-Odd Provinces, 1853-56, 13 1/2 x 8 11/16
Maiko Beach at Harima, from the series Famous Places in the Sixty-Odd Provinces, 1853-56, 13 1/2 x 8 11/16
Ohashi, Sudden Shower at Atake, from the series Hundred Views of Edo, 1857, 13 1/4 x 8 9/16

Hokusai (1760-1849)
Sekiya Village on the Sumida River, from the series Thirty-Six Views of Fuji, circa 1829-33, 9 7/8 x 14 13/16

Kokei (contemporary)
Kabuki Actor, circa 1991, 15 x 9 5/16

Ko-u (active circa 1830)
Ship and Poems (Surimono), 16 1/2 x 21 3/4

Kunichika (1835-1900)
Beauty with Shamisen, 14 1/4 x 9 9/16
Beauty as Poet, 13 7/8 x 9 9/16

Kunisada (1786-1865)
Actor on the Tokaido, 13 3/4 x 9 5/16

Shun'ei (1768-1819)
Two Actors, 12 7/16 x 8 1/2

Shinsui (1896-1972)
Leaving the Bath, 1922, 16 x 9 11/16

Shunkei (active 1820-40)
Rooster, Hen, and Baby Chick (Surimono), 1825, 14 x 19 1/8

Toyokuni (1769-1825)
Danjuro as Samurai, 14 3/16 x 9 7/16

Toyoshige (1777-1835)
Beauties in the Snow, triptych, 14 1/4 x 30 overall

Utamaro (1753-1806)
Calligraphy Lesson, 14 1/2 x 9 1/2
Two Courtesans, 15 1/2 x 10 1/8

Yoshiiku (1833-1909)
Foreigners with Camera, 13 5/16 x 8 7/8

Yoshitoshi (1839-1892)
Moxa Treatment, 13 3/16 x 9 1/2
Omatsu Killing Shirosaburo, from New Selection of Eastern Brocade Pictures, 1886, diptych, 13 1/8 x 17 5/8 overall

Yoshuuki (1835-1879)
Battle Scene, triptych, 14 x 29 1/4 overall

Cover: Toyokuni, Danjuro as Samurai

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