

# The lasting impact of Japanese ukiyo-e

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ONE of the oldest, most venerated art practices in the world is being celebrated at STPI, Singapore's top contemporary art space.

*Ukiyo-e*, a type of woodblock printing and painting, flourished in the Edo period of Japan from the 17th to 19th centuries. But its popularity spread far beyond the nation's borders, influencing many important European artists in 19th century Paris including Manet, Monet, Degas, Toulouse-Lautrec and van Gogh.

Many distinguishing features of *ukiyo-e* – clear outlines, bold fields of colour, asymmetrical perspectives and ordinary subjects – inspired the Europeans to radically re-orientate their perspectives on art, giving rise to the Impressionist movement that marked the start of modern Western art.

On display at STPI from now until mid-September are iconic *ukiyo-e* prints by its most famous practitioners. They include Hokusai, Hiroshige, Sharaku and Utamari whose works are on loan from the Minneapolis Institute of Arts (MIA) collection for the exhibition.

Recounting the development of *ukiyo-e*, MIA's deputy director and chief curator Matthew Welch says: "Japan had become very prosperous during the Edo period (1603 to 1868) and there was great wealth in the cities. So people had the financial wherewithal to support artists and purchase art . . . and not just art but also fashion, lacquerware and other products – all of it reaching a fever pitch in that era."

*Ukiyo* means "floating world" and *e* means "pictures". The "floating world" refers to the youthful, pleasure-seeking culture that was thriving in the urban centres of Edo (the old name for Tokyo), Osaka and Kyoto. The early *ukiyo-e* pictures were regarded as subversive because they depicted non-conventional scenes, such as of brothels and the kabuki theatre.

Later, the practice of *ukiyo-e* expanded to depict landscapes, past-times, portraits and even supernatural entities. Indeed, some of the most popular *ukiyo-e* prints centred on landscapes because they offered the Japanese a glimpse of other parts of their country at a time when travel was restricted.

Among the recognisable images in this exhibition are Hiroshige's prints that are taken from his series, the *53 Stations of the Tokaido* and *100 Famous Views of Edo*. Also iconic is Hokusai's *The Great Wave Off Kanagawa*, which illustrates a massive wave threatening boats off the prefecture of Kanagawa.

Although now more than 200 years old, *ukiyo-e* continues to influence today's artists such as Masami Teraoka, Emily Allchurch and Wilson Shieh, whose works are also included in this exhibition. Mr Welch says: "In a way, *ukiyo-e* could be regarded as the precursor of the Pop Art of Andy Warhol and Richard Hamilton in that their prints were inexpensive, produced in



**Iconic print:** *Hiroshige's Distant View of Atake in Evening Shower over the Ohashi Bridge*

multiples and dealt with irreverent or subversive subject matters."

*Edo Pop: The Graphic Impact of Japanese Prints is on until Sept 13 at STPI, 41 Robertson Quay. Admission is free. There are also special programmes in conjunction with the exhibition, including a talk by artist Bidou Yamaguchi on Noh masks at 11am tomorrow, and a curator's walk-through at 2.30pm tomorrow.*