

Ukiyo-e – Yesterday and Today

By Wai Lin Coultas

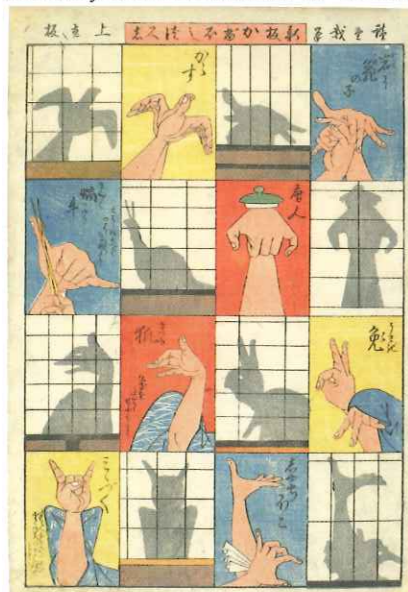
Not to be missed, the exhibition of *ukiyo-e* in STPI's current show *Edo Pop: The Graphic Impact of Japanese Prints* will take the visitor on a magical walk through the history of woodblock printing, from its early days to the works of contemporary artists inspired by the *ukiyo-e*. Over 50 Japanese woodblock prints from the collection of the Minneapolis Institute of Arts are on display and provide a kaleidoscopic view of popular culture in pre-modern Japan, as well as covering a broad sweep of works by today's artists.

Historically, *ukiyo-e* were first produced in the 1600s and gained prominence through the 1700s and 1800s. This 200-year period was a time of prolonged peace, when Edo (modern-day Tokyo) was the seat of government and political and military power was in the hands of the shoguns. It was also a time of economic growth, a prosperity whose main beneficiaries were the urban commoners (*chonin*), mainly merchants, who were at the bottom of the Japanese social order. Many indulged in entertainments such as kabuki theatre and visited the courtesans and geishas in the 'pleasure districts'.

Therefore, *ukiyo-e* focused primarily on beautiful women, kabuki actors, sumo wrestlers and erotica. Coined by 17th century popular fiction writer Asai Ryoi, the term means 'pictures (*e*) of the floating (*uki*) world (*yo*)' and is a play on words. A homophone, written with a different character for *uki*, had long been used in Buddhist texts to connote the miseries of life on earth. By changing the first character from 'misery' (憂世) to 'floating' (浮世), Asai cleverly implied that life seemed not dire, but pleasure-filled and dreamlike.

This is an apt description of the hedonistic lifestyles depicted in the art form. This emphasis on what to paint or print was further cemented by the *chonin*'s inclination to purchase *ukiyo-e* to decorate their homes.

Consequently, *ukiyo-e* evolved to serve its aesthetic function: the early popularity of Hishikawa Moronobu's paintings and monochromatic prints of beautiful women grew to include colour – initially with the various hues added by hand. As the mid-18th century approached, prints



Utagawa Hiroshige (1797-1858), Eight Shadow Figures from the series New Edition of Shadow Making, circa 1842

by artists such as Okumura Masanobu were made using multiple woodblocks to print different areas of an *ukiyo-e* with a multiplicity of colours. In the 1760s, Suzuki Harunobu pioneered the production of multi-coloured *ukiyo-e* prints (*nishiki-e* or brocade pictures), spelling the demise of existing techniques that produced two and three-colour versions.



Kabukido Enkyo, active circa 1796. (The actor) Nakamura Nakazo II as Matsuomaru, 1796, in the play Sugawara denju tenarai kagami

With *nishiki-e* becoming the standard, the use of 10 to 20 woodblocks transformed *ukiyo-e* to the renowned multi-hued pieces we see to this day. Nevertheless, the defining feature of *ukiyo-e* monochromatic prints remained – that of the visibly well-defined flat line. In those very early stages of *ukiyo-e* development, it was the only printed element.

Colour continued to dominate as the composition in *ukiyo-e* is noted for the arrangement of forms on flat spaces: figures were characteristically arranged along a single plane to focus the eyes on vertical and horizontal relationships, as well as the flowing lines, perfect shapes and classic patterns that, for example, decorate the elaborate clothing adorning the geishas or kabuki actors.

In *nishiki-e*, these fluid lines continued to sharply define the coloured areas' contours. Thus, the aesthetics from flat colours differed from the modulated ones expected in western artistic traditions and from other then-current practices in Japanese art, namely the monochrome brushstrokes of the Zen Buddhist *zenga* brush painting or the colours of the Chinese-influenced Kano schools.

Given the number of colours needed to produce one edition of *nishiki-e*, artists rarely carved their own woodblocks, applying their artistry only into designing the prints. A carver would then painstakingly cut the blocks of wood and a printer would meticulously ink them. Hand-made paper was placed on the block and hand-rubbed to transfer ink to paper. A publisher financed the collaboration

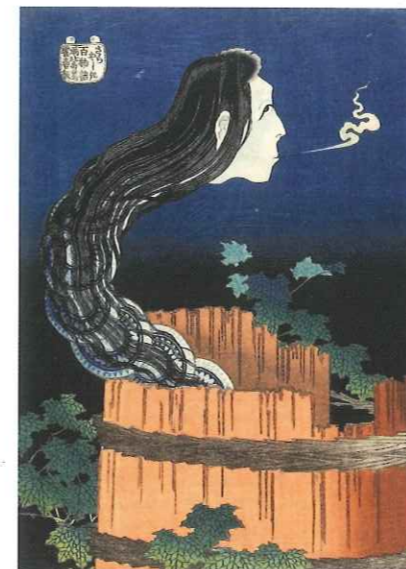
and also promoted and distributed the prints. Moreover, as all printing was done by hand, the print-makers were able to achieve effects the printing machines of those days failed to attain, such as the blending or gradation of colours on the printing block.

Having reached the pinnacle of technical development, the *ukiyo-e* artists began to change the subject matter: although grandmasters like Torii Kiyonaga, Kitagawa Utamaro and Toshisai Sharaku continued to create portraits of beauties and actors into the late 1700s, these were supplanted by depictions of Japanese landscapes in the 1800s, works such as Katsushika Hokusai's *Under the Wave off Kanagawa* and Utagawa Hiroshige's *Fifty-three Stations of the Tokaido Road* series. This transition to landscapes, travel scenes and pictures of nature, especially of birds and flowers, along with those from history and folklore, was a direct response to the introduction of the Tenpo Reforms from 1841 to 1843 in Japan.

The reforms were an array of economic policies that led to the later suppression of outward displays of luxury, including the depictions of courtesans and erotica in *ukiyo-e*.

The landscapes that evolved mirrored the way Chinese ink brush painters composed their paintings since the *ukiyo-e* masters relied heavily on imagination, composition and atmosphere rather than on the period's preference for a strict observance of nature. An *ukiyo-e* artist did not need to ignite his creativity by sitting and gazing at a scenic spot.

Following the demise of the *ukiyo-e* grandmasters Hokusai and Hiroshige, came the Meiji Restoration of 1868; a chain of events that restored imperial rule in Japan under the Meiji emperor. The resulting technological and social changes of the country became responsible for Japan's emergence as a modern nation in the early 20th century. Unfortunately, it spelled a decline in the production of *ukiyo-e*, both in quantity and quality.



Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849) The Manor's Dishes, from the series One Hundred Tales, 1831-32

western interest in prints of traditional Japanese scenes revived print-making in Japan; the new *shin-hanga* movement maintained the time-honoured *ukiyo-e* collaborative



Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849), Suspension Bridge between Hida and Etchu from the series Unusual Views of Famous Bridges in Various Provinces, 1833-34

system needed in its creation, printing and distribution, while *sosaku-hanga* (creative print) promoted the drawing, carving and inking of an artwork by a single artist, with the aim of guaranteeing self-expression. The latter soon surpassed the former in sustaining innovation and today, *sosaku-hanga* artists such as Korishiro Onchi, Unichi Hiratsuka, Sadao Watanabe and Maki Haku are well-known in this field.

Since the late 20th century, some Japanese artists and others such as the English artist Emily Allchurch, continue to be inspired by the *ukiyo-e* method, marrying ancient techniques to western notions of perspective for screen-printing, etching, mezzotint and mixed media.

This uniquely Japanese style of creating art is undoubtedly here to stay.

Please also see: Hokusai's 'The Great Wave', *Ukiyo-e and Japanese Woodblock Printing* by Jessica Yap in the March/April 2014 issue of *PASSAGE*.

A version of this article, *The Ever Evolving Ukiyo-e* was posted on www.singart.com on 20 June 2014 by Wai Lin Coultas.

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All photos courtesy of the Minneapolis Institute of Arts