Ukiyo-e: Pictures of the Floating World

Japanese Woodblock Prints

18th - 19th centuries

Multicolored Japanese woodblock prints flourished during the 18th and 19th centuries, beginning during the Edo period (1615-1868) and continuing through the Meiji era (1868-1912). The colorful images initially featured celebrity actors and the fashionable courtesans of urban pleasure districts. Later, they depicted familiar landscapes with images of daily life, scenic sites, and dramatic historical events. Such prints became a distinct genre created for and consumed by the increasingly affluent middle class in Japan’s growing urban centers, particularly in the

capital city of Edo (present-day Tokyo). Wealthy merchants, townspeople, and artisans satirically referred to their flourishing world of indulgence and luxury as “*ukiyo*” ("floating world"), a Buddhist term describing the transitory nature of the material world.

Selected from the Museum’s permanent collection, these *ukiyo-e* prints feature scenes of summer, when outdoor and evening activities were most popular. Despite the fame of artist-designers such as Hokusai and Hiroshige whose names we associate with prints today, the production of these polychrome prints involved at least three other individuals: the woodcarver, the printer, and the publisher. It was the publisher who conceived of and

issued the print as a commercial venture, and who also served as the financier, coordinator, and marketing agent. Though credit was generally given to the artist-designers, they were dependent on the skill and ingenuity of the carvers and printers to realize their artistic visions.

These mass-produced and relatively affordable woodblock prints were introduced to Western audiences during the latter half of the 19th century, and their influence is particularly visible in the work of the French Impressionists.

Hokusai and Hiroshige

Hokusai and his younger contemporary, Hiroshige, are considered two of the greatest landscape artists of the *ukiyo-e* printmaking tradition. They consolidated the landscape print into an independent genre and, for the first time, depicted a wide range of Japan's scenic beauty in a manner that the common man could readily appreciate.

Working in series, Hokusai and Hiroshige memorialized the landmarks of Japan—images of the sacred Mt. Fuji; famous views in and around the capital city of Edo (present-day Tokyo) and the provinces; and the scenes along the famed Tōkaidō,

the main highway that connected Edo with the Imperial capital, Kyoto. Hiroshige manipulated color gradations, scale, and perspectives to create evocative portrayals of the changing aspects of nature whose poetic mood contrasts sharply with Hokusai's lucid, and dynamic compositions in which common people silently work and carry on daily activities.

At the end of the nineteenth century, it was mostly the images of landscapes by Hiroshige and Hokusai that gave Western artists such as van Gogh a new vision of nature.

Katsushika HOKUSAI 葛飾北斎

Japanese, 1760-1849

Hodogaya Station on the Tōkaidō Road*, *Travelers Passing a Row of Pines, from the series "**Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji"** c. 1829-1833

Color woodblock print on paper

Lent by Janet Way, L.2001.1.11

At the center of this print lies Japan’s iconic Mount Fuji, whose immobility is lyrically expressed through a row of pine trees and travelers in motion. From right to left, an itinerant Buddhist monk wearing a hat and carrying a patchwork backpack heads up a

hillside, a servant, at the center of the picture, takes notice of the distant mountain while leading the horse of a traveler and cargo, and palanquin bearers take a brief respite from carrying a sleeping passenger.

Katsushika HOKUSAI 葛飾北斎

Japanese, 1760-1849

***Waterfall Where Yoshitsune Washed His Horse, Yoshino, Yamato* Province**, from the series “**Waterfalls of Various Provinces**” c. 1831-1832

Color woodblock print on paper

Gift of Mary Louise Way in memory of Roland A. Way, 1990.24.3

The dramatic scene of a gushing waterfall references a legend about the tragic, much-loved general Minamoto Yoshitsune (1159-1189). While fleeing from a political struggle, Yoshitsune stopped to rest and

wash his favorite horse beneath a waterfall, somewhere deep in the mountains of the Yoshino region in southern Yamato Province (also called Washu; now Nara Prefecture).

Utagawa HIROSHIGE 歌川広重

Japanese, 1797-1858

Arimatsu Tie-dyed Cloth, Narumi Station 41,

from the series "**Famous Sights of the Fifty-three Stations**" 1855

Color woodblock print on paper

Museum purchase with deaccessioning funds provided by Peggy Maximus, Carol L. Valentine and F. Bailey Vanderhoef, Jr., 2001.60

In front of Narumi Station lies Arimatsu, a place famous for its tie-dyed cloth. Fabrics for summer kimonos, wrapping cloths, and kimono belts made from cotton cloth dyed with Japanese indigo blue or red were among the most popular. The yellow hue of

the sky in the background and drying fabrics swaying in the breeze evoke the golden sunsets and warmth of Japanese summers.

Utagawa KUNIYOSHI 歌川国芳

Japanese, 1798-1861

Fireworks in the Cool of the Summer Evening at Ryōgoku Bridge 1854

Color woodblock print on paper, triptych

Gift of the Frederick B. Kellam collection, 1971.3.575abc

Kobayashi Kiyochika

Kiyochika's career spanned the entirety of the Meiji era (1868-1912), a time of rapid social change as Japan entered the modern era. He created an innovative style by incorporating various Western artistic techniques and expressions into traditional *ukiyo-e* aesthetics. He was especially renowned for his "light ray pictures" (*kōsenga*) exploring the effects of light and darkness, in particular in nighttime scenes illuminated by the newly introduced gas lamps in the city. These two prints depict the viewing of fireworks, in the old days a religious purification activity to ward off illness brought by the summer heat, but by Kiyochika's time signaling the arrival of summer.

Kiyochika’s conscious play on the manifold effects of light, through reflections, shadows, silhouettes, and illumination evoke in these prints a mood at once lyrical and haunting, both nostalgic and foreboding, which earned Kiyochika the title “Hiroshige of Meiji,” comparing him to the great Edo landscape master.

Kobayashi KIYOCHIKA 小林清親

Japanese, 1847-1915

Summer Fireworks at Shinobazu Pond, Tokyo

1881

Color woodblock print on paper

Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Roland A. Way, 1985.43.1

Kobayashi KIYOCHIKA 小林清親

Japanese, 1847-1915

View of Summer Fireworks at Ryōgoku*, *Tokyo

1880

Color woodblock print on paper

Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Roland A. Way, 1985.43.14

Jōmon Jar

Japan, late Jōmon period, 1,500 - 300 BCE

Earthenware

Museum purchase, 1968.22

Jōmon, literally “cord-patterned “period, is named after the rope-like designs found on pottery produced during Japan’s earliest ceramic culture. Low-fired deep vessels with a marked sculptural quality like this jar, were constructed with the coil-and-paddle method and were decorated with simple geometric patterns with meandering rope-like designs.

Demon Chanting Buddhist Prayers (*Oni Nenbutsu*)

Japan, 18th-19th century

Wood with faint traces of pigment and gesso

Museum Purchase, Peggy and John Maximus Fund, 2015.53abc

Oni Nenbutsu or “Demon Chanting Buddhist Prayers”, is a character popularized by simple folk paintings called *Ōtsu-e,* or “Ōtsu pictures,” from the town of Ōtsu outside of Kyoto. They were sold as protective talismans to travelers and religious pilgrims passing through the town.

Dressed as an itinerant monk with billowing sleeves, this praying *oni* carries a gong around his neck, a

striker (now missing) in one hand and a donor registry in the other hand and seeks contributions for the upkeep of his temple. The playful contradiction of a demon masquerading as a Buddhist monk would have amused the townspeople in the increasingly secularized urban culture of the Edo period (1615-1868). Is this sculpture mocking man's hypocritical nature, or marveling that even a demon can be converted to Buddhism?

Toward the 19th century, "chanting *oni*" became the most recognizable of the *Ōtsu-e* folk characters who were represented in popular art and literature. Large sculptures of this figure are unusual, indicating that he may have originally been placed in a temple or used as a signpost for advertising *Ōtsu-e*.

Shiokawa BUNRIN 塩川文麟

Japanese, 1808-1877

The Miraculous Appearance of Folktale Characters from* Ōtsu-e *Pictures 1871

Hanging scroll, ink and light colors on silk

Museum purchase with funds provided by the Friends of Asian Art, Private Donations and Special Acquisition Funds, 1981.23

The assorted characters here belong to the repertoire of *Ōtsu-e*, or “Ōtsu pictures,” which were simple, local folk paintings, serving as protective talismans, sold to travelers and religious pilgrims passing through the town of Ōtsu along the Tōkaidō highway that linked Edo (Tokyo) with Kyoto. By the

19th century, the folk deities and characters from popular mythology were codified into a group of ten and were represented in art and literature.

Unlike the simple folk paintings of single icons, this painting is rendered with sophisticated brushwork, by one of the pre-eminent professional painters in Kyoto, Bunrin, who composed the figures together, floating like apparitions. Bunrin is known for his evocative, atmospheric landscape paintings and only infrequently painted figures.

Thunder God (in the Clouds) Fishing for His Drum- protects against thunder and lightning

Catching a Catfish with a Gourd- protects against drowning

Benkei, the Warrior-Monk, Stealing the Bell of Miidera Temple- protects against robbery

Spear-Bearer- protects travelers

Wisteria Maiden- ensures good match in marriage

Blind musician- protects against falling

Falconer-ensures good harvest

Fukurokuju, the God of Longevity Having his head Shaved- ensures long, prosperous life

Stone of the Warrior Sharpening Arrow- protects against evil spirits

Demon in Monk's Robe Chanting Buddhist's Prayers- stops children from crying at night

Attributed to TOSA Mitsuoki

Japanese, 1617-1691

The Tale of Bunshō, the Salt-maker

Calligraphy by Mushanokōji Sanekage (1662-1738), calligraphy dated 1688

Ink, color, gold, and silver on paper; one of three handscrolls set

Museum purchase with the Peggy and John Maximus Fund and SBMA Friends of Asian Art, 2012.7.1-.3

This set of handscrolls, lavishly decorated with gold and pigments, is from the former collection of Viscount Tōdō Takanori (1894–1947). It was likely acquired around 1688, when dated and signed by high-ranking court calligrapher Mushanokōji

Sanekage whose elegant calligraphy graced the handscroll. Tosa Mitsuoki, reviver of the classical style, established the Tosa school as the official painters of the imperial court in Kyoto.

Tale of Bunshō is one of the ultimate rags-to-riches stories of pre-modern Japan. The story arose out of myths and legends in the 15th century and was circulated in scrolls, like this set, as well as in hand-painted and printed books throughout the 18th century. The story recounts how Bunshō, an attendant at a Shinto Shrine, left his service to become a wealthy salt merchant. Through hard work, good deeds, and devotion to the deity Kashima, his beautiful daughters brought him more wealth and

social status as one married an imperial prince and the other the Emperor.

The story resonated with the merchant culture of the early-Edo period and became popular among urban elites. With its auspicious themes of good fortune and moral lessons, it soon became a favorite New Year’s Day “first reading,” especially for girls.

Views of Scenic Sites Itsukushima (left) and Wakanoura Shrines

Japan, Edo period, 17th-18th century

Color and ink on gold leaf; pair of six-panel screens

Museum Purchase with the Peggy and John Maximus Fund, 2017.26.1-.2

These screens portray two of Japan's scenic locales, Wakanoura (right) and Itsukushima (left), famous for their ancient Shinto shrines. Located on Japan's Seto Inland Sea, both were noted in court poetry as early as the ninth century. From these early poetic renderings, "famous places" (*meisho*) developed into a central genre of traditional Japanese painting.

By the end of 17th century, peace and economic improvements fostered religious pilgrimages and travel for leisure. Marked by red *torii* gates, both shrines' surroundings are populated with figures from all classes: priests, courtiers, samurai, and commoners, many accompanied by children, some engaged in lively activities. Seasonal activities are represented—cherry blossom viewing parties in the springtime (right screen) and music making under the red maple foliage in autumn (left).

These screens were produced by anonymous *machi-eshi, or* "town painters" in Kyoto who created the earliest paintings showing activities of all classes in the current time. These artists, to satisfy the

insatiable taste for the new and fashionable of the wealthy urbanites, produced images eclectic in subject and style, with innovative compositions using rich mineral pigments and gold leaf.


Japan
Kyoto
Tokyo
Itsukushima
Nara
Wakanoura

Japanese Lacquer

Lacquer is the sap of the *Rhus verniciflua* tree, a species closely related to poison ivy, which is native to both China and Japan. This natural resin is used to protect and decorate objects. Lacquer is most commonly applied to a wooden core, but can also be used with woven bamboo, clay, metal, porcelain, or fabric. In the 18th century, Europeans so admired these lustrous objects that they referred to lacquer simply as "japan" just as the term "china" has come to indicate porcelain.

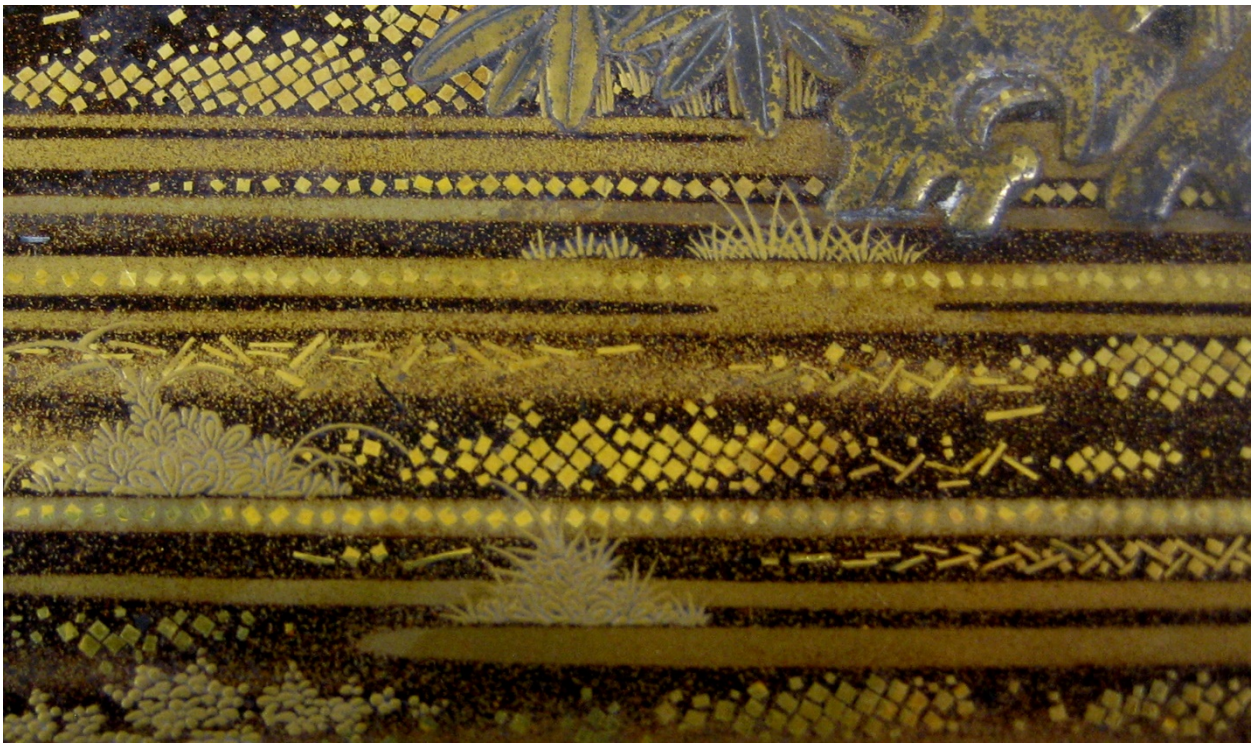
Raw lacquer is toxic, and the art of lacquering requires the utmost patience and care in handling. The finest lacquers are usually comprised of many thin coatings. Each layer is allowed to harden

before the next is applied. While the Chinese prefer the aesthetics of carved lacquer, the Japanese developed decorative designs from sprinkling gold or silver powder over wet lacquer, a technique known as *maki-e*, literally “sprinkled picture.”

Nashiji "pear-skin": irregularly shaped flakes of gold are embedded into reddish or translucent, amber-colored lacquer. Usually a background treatment.

Hiramaki-e "flat sprinkled-design": the sprinkled powders are coated with a thin layer of translucent lacquer without further polishing or burnishing.

Takamaki-e "relief sprinkled-design": designs are modeled in relief by building up the surface over which the gold powder is to be sprinkled.



Kirikan-e “cut gold-sheet design”: gold or silver sheets finely cut into tiny strips or squares.

Picnic Set with Food Boxes and a *Sake* Bottle

Japan, Edo -Meiji period, late 19th century

Lacquer and gold on wood; gold, silver, and red *nashiji-e* and *hiramaki-e* lacquer; metal handle and fittings; signed "Ipposai"

Gift of F. Bailey Vanderhoef, Jr, 1991.148.98

The decorations on this picnic set and the unusual *sake* bottle in the shape of a pipe organ (*shō*) reflect a playful aesthetic (*asobi*) popular during the Edo period. The dance headdresses under brilliant red maples, along with a zither, a lute, a flute, and a drum in a flame-embellished frame, are

accoutrements for the performance of *bugaku*, a court dance, once reserved for the enjoyment of courtiers. The noble pursuit of ancient courtiers now playfully embellishes a utilitarian object made to delight contemporary townspeople during picnics and autumn maple viewings.

Box in the Form of a Double Peach

Japan, Edo period, first half of 19th century

Lacquer on wood decorated with gold *takamaki-e*

Gift of F. Bailey Vanderhoef, Jr., 1991.148.101ab

The unusual form of this elegant small box is indicative of the skill and inventiveness of Edo period lacquer designers. The double peach denotes wishes for happiness in marriage.

Round Box

Japan, Edo period, 19th century

Lacquer on wood with mother-of-pearl inlay,

gold *hiramaki-e*, *takamaki-e*, and *nashiji-e*

Gift of F. Bailey Vanderhoef, Jr., 1991.148.102

Teacup Stand

Japan, Edo period, 18th century

Black lacquer on wood with gold and pewter *nashiji-e* and *hiramaki-e*

Gift of F. Bailey Vanderhoef, Jr., 1991.148.103

This stand is adorned with the auspicious Chinese motif of pine, bamboo, and plum known as “The Three Friends of Winter.” With a ground of interlocking circles, the stand also shows a round pattern of stylized ginger plants, and the family crest (*mon*) of the Nabeshima clan. The lacquerware was almost certainly commissioned by this powerful *daimyō* family of northern Kyūshū province.

Writing Box

Japan, Edo period, 19th century

Lacquer on wood, decorated with *nashiji-e, gold takamaki-e,* and *kirikan-e,* inkstone, and metal water dropper

Gift of Jane W. Watson, 1989.39

Cosmetic Stand with Drawers

Japan, 19th century

Lacquered wood; decoration in gold, metal fittings

Gift of F. Bailey Vanderhoef, Jr. , 1991.148.97

This stand, decorated with auspicious designs, is likely part of a dowry for an affluent bride. The designs of pines sharing roots carry the auspicious wish for the lives of the newlyweds to be entwined for eternity. A broom and a rake in front of the pines are the symbols of a man and a woman growing old together. Furthermore, the broom and rake also

suggest the theme of sweeping away bad luck and raking in good fortune.

Prince Shōtoku Taishi as a Child Praying to Buddha

Japan, Muromachi period (1336-1573)

Wood with traces of polychrome, crystal eyes

Museum Purchase with funds provided by the SBMA Women's Board, 2006.85

Prince Shōtoku Taishi (574-622) served as regent to Empress Suiko (r. 593-628), who promoted the Buddhist religion, which had reached Japan from India via China and Korea, and firmly established its place within Japanese society. Later Shōtoku was popularly worshipped by all Buddhist sects as the founder of Buddhism in Japan. A devotional cult was formed around him in the 13th century.

Votive images, like this one, often depict Prince Shōtoku during different periods in his life, each reflecting a significant event. This sculpture portrays a miraculous event that occurred when Prince Shōtoku was two years old. Such a sculpture would have been placed in a Buddhist temple, most likely in a separate niche apart from the main image.

Miya Ando

American, b. 1973

Hamon 2.4.2, 2015

Pigment and urethane on aluminum

Gift of Edith Caldwell and Miya Ando, 2020.3.3

Miya Ando is a New York-based visual artist of Japanese and Russian descent. She is a sixteenth-generation descendant of Ando Yoshiro Masakatsu, a famous Bizen sword maker. She was raised among sword smiths-turned-Buddhists in a Buddhist temple in Okayama, Japan. While using the material of aluminum, Ando draws upon her family's heritage of working with steel to create this work. *Hamon* refers to the visual effect, particularly the wavy pattern,

created on a sword’s steel blade during the hardening process that was traditionally used to judge its artistic value. By layering tinted polyurethane varnish on polished aluminum, Ando creates a light-suffused surface that is at once reflective, temporal, and transitory, seminal to the qualities of subtle transformation one experiences in nature.