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Review of *The Ear Catches the Eye: Music in Japanese Prints*

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Recommended Citation

Davis, J. (2001). Review of *The Ear Catches the Eye: Music in Japanese Prints*. *Print Quarterly*, 18 (4), 456-457. Retrieved from http://repository.upenn.edu/histart_papers/7

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Comments

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346. Kunisada, *Iwai Tojaku as an Old Woman, Iwai Hanshirō VI as a Geisha and Ichikawa Ebizō as Tozaemon Denkichi*, woodcut, 380 × 750 mm (Birmingham City Museum).

kabuki theatre fan to preserve prints he or she had purchased over the preceding two decades. All of the prints depict the actors in full figure; there are no half-length portraits. No particular actor or group of plays predominates, but two thirds of the prints were issued between 1828 and 1831, and the majority (69 of the 81 sheets) are by Kunisada (1786–1865). There are also designs by three of Kunisada's contemporaries: Kuniyoshi (7 sheets); Toyokuni II (3 sheets); and Kuniyasu (2 sheets). Kunisada was the most prolific and commercially successful designer of actor prints between 1812 and his death, early in 1865. It is therefore no surprise to find his work figuring so prominently in the Birmingham album.

One of the strengths of the album is the number of complete triptychs it contains. Such *ōban* triptychs rarely survive intact (fig. 346). In all, there are eleven complete triptychs by Kunisada in the album, as well as two four-sheet compositions and six diptychs. The prints were treated with care before being bound into the album, which then protected them. (They were only slightly trimmed when bound.) As a result they are in excellent condition, clean and fresh with startlingly bright colours. Japanese colour woodcuts are among the most light-sensitive objects in any museum. Even a few months exposure to moderate light levels will cause them irreparable damage, so that one rarely encounters them with such vibrant colours.

The prints contained in this album offer a stunning survey of the actor prints of Kunisada's early maturity. Not only are they remarkably fresh, they are also powerfully designed. The many and varied diptychs and triptychs in the album convey a sense of the visual splendour of Japanese actor prints and of their effectiveness in capturing the excitement

of the *kabuki* stage. The Birmingham Album of Japanese Actor Prints was a hidden treasure now revealed. All the prints will be on display in the museum from 6 October 2001 to 3 March 2002. An illustrated booklet with eight colour illustrations has been produced to accompany the exhibition. ELLIS TINIOS

MUSIC IN JAPANESE PRINTS. 'The Ear Catches the Eye: Music in Japanese Prints', held at the Gemeentemuseum Den Haag from 28 October 2000 to 14 January 2001, was based on the museum's permanent collection of instruments and music-related materials, with important prints lent by the Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde as well as private collections. The project brought together musical instruments and their pictorial representations to add to our understanding of this aspect of Tokugawa-period material culture. The exhibition catalogue includes essays by Magda Kyrova, Onno Mensink, Erika de Poorter, Thomas Leims, Linda Fujie and Margarita Winkel, with catalogue entries by Matthi Forrer (*The Ear Catches the Eye: Music in Japanese Prints*, Leiden, Hotei Publishing and Gemeentemuseum Den Haag, 2000, 191 pp., 165 col. and 3 b. & w. ill., Dfl 79.50). It includes colour illustrations of the objects featured in the exhibition, including a nearly complete array of period instruments and 150 Japanese prints.

After an introduction to the history of the Gemeentemuseum Den Haag collection, the catalogue essays turn to Japanese music and performance, discussing the instruments and their use in the theatrical genres of *Nō*, *Kyōgen* and *Kabuki* as well as in festivals and the pleasure quarters. These admirable introductions to the worlds of Japanese music and its performance cover all aspects that might be expected in

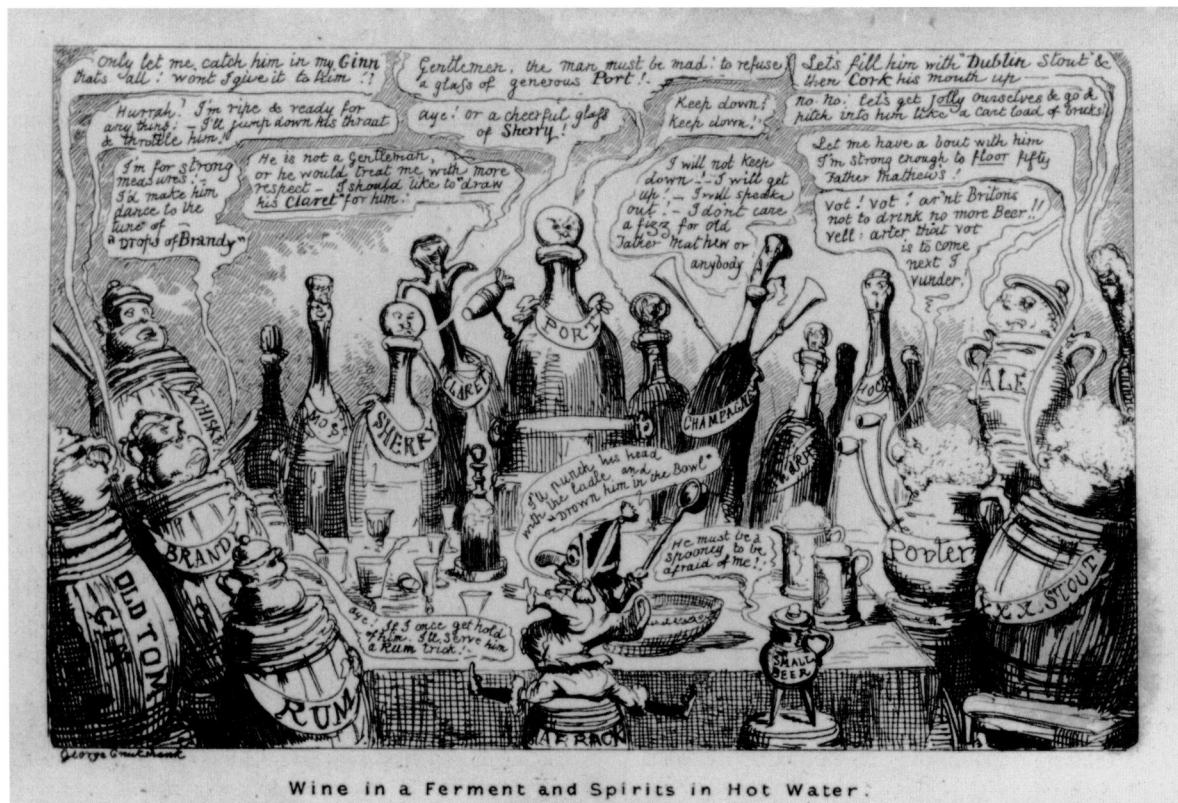
an exhibition on Japanese music and its depiction in Japanese prints – save one: an overview article addressing print culture, its artists and patrons. The emphasis in the catalogue is thus more on the culture of music that surrounded the prints, with the result that the prints are largely employed as illustrations of instruments and performance rather than discussed as works of cultural importance in their own right. As so many of the prints included in the exhibition were *surimono*, it would have been worthwhile to take into account the elite and erudite milieu in which they were created.

The catalogue is beautifully produced, with special attention paid to quality photography and reproduction of the objects; in particular, the effects of embossing, colourants and metallic elements in the *surimono* prints are nicely conveyed. The catalogue entries are rather sparse, giving the essential information about each instrument and print. More could have been included in these entries, especially given the lack of an overview essay on print culture. In addition, in an ideal world these entries would have included translations of all poems and other inscriptions that appear on the prints, for without them the complex interaction of word and image is lost. The catalogue's thematic organization works for the most part; however, the 'Yoshiwara' section is problematic in its inclusion of a variety of female

performers who were not employed in the licensed pleasure district. It would have been beneficial if greater attention had been given to such details.

The Ear Catches the Eye: Music in Japanese Prints does much to familiarize the reader with the use and depiction of instruments and their performance, but, unfortunately, looking at the *shamisen* is not the same as hearing its plangent notes. While the eye may indeed have been caught, not so the ear (in spite of the awkward title). As an exhibition on the theme of music, it includes useful information about instrument types and musical genres, and is a useful reference point for its many fine impressions. Some astonishing eighteenth-century prints display the rare and fugitive colourants of lavender, pale blue, and green, while some nineteenth-century prints are in stunningly fresh condition. While we may long for more specific information about the print culture, the catalogue is a good introduction to this unusual theme, and it will appeal to general readers, those interested in music and performance, and those with a passion for Japanese prints. JULIE NELSON DAVIS

TEETOTAL PROPAGANDA. George Cruikshank's recently cleaned oil painting, *The Worship of Bacchus* (1860–62), was recently the subject of an 'in focus display' at the rebranded Tate Britain, 24 May–2 December. The



347. George Cruikshank, *Comic Almanac: Wine in a Ferment and Spirits in Hot Water*, 1844, etching, 100 × 163 mm (Private collection).