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Review of Fujisawa Akane, Kobayashi Tadashi, Ellis Tinios, Laura J. Mueller (Eds.), *Competition and Collaboration: Japanese Prints of the Utagawa School*

**Disciplines**

Arts and Humanities | Asian Art and Architecture | History of Art, Architecture, and Archaeology

# The Utagawa School

Julie Nelson Davis

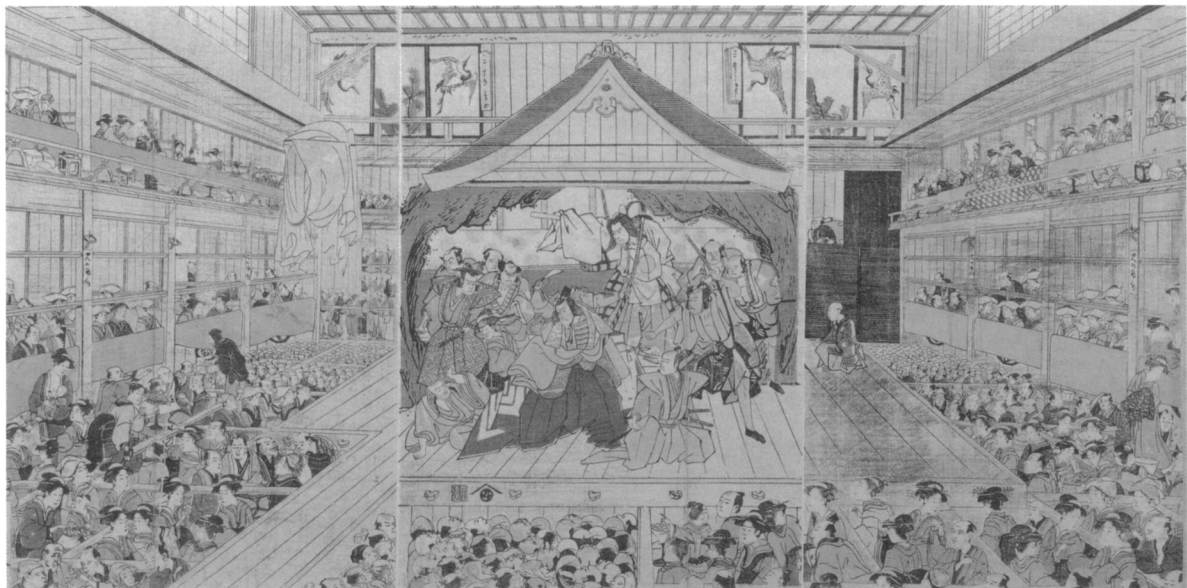
Fujisawa Akane, Kobayashi Tadashi and Ellis Tinios, edited by Laura J. Mueller, *Competition and Collaboration: Japanese Prints of the Utagawa School*, Madison, Wisconsin, Chazen Museum of Art and Hotei Publishing, 2007, 232 pp., 253 col. and 10 b. & w. ills., €84, \$120.

This book is an impressive study of one of the most important schools working in *ukiyo-e* from the late eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries. The project was organized by Laura J. Mueller as an exhibition (Madison, WI, Chazen Museum, 3 November 2007–6 January 2008, and New York, The Brooklyn Museum, 21 March–15 June 2008) and accompanied by this catalogue. With essays by Mueller, Akane, Tadashi and Tinios, and an extensive set of catalogue entries, *Competition and Collaboration* takes a serious and scholarly approach to the study of the Utagawa school of *ukiyo-e* artists. *Ukiyo-e*, the ‘images of floating world’, were classed as commercial works in their time, and by and large these printed materials display the fashions and entertainments available in the major cities of the early modern period, in which the Utagawa school was one of its most successful lineages.

The prints selected for the exhibition and catalogue all come from the Van Vleck Collection of Japanese woodblock

prints in the Chazen Museum of Art at the University of Wisconsin. With more than 4,000 prints by about 140 artists, this is the eighth largest collection of Japanese prints in the United States, and by virtue of being at a university museum is considered one of the most important teaching collections in the world (p. 6). The collection was formed by Edward Burr Van Vleck, Professor of Mathematics at University of Wisconsin-Madison (1909–26). A savvy collector, Van Vleck acquired two collections to form the centre of his own; these included the holdings of Thomas and J. Harriet Goodell and, more famously, that of Frank Lloyd Wright. This was acquired after Wright, having used the prints as collateral, defaulted on a bank loan and the bank sold the prints to recoup its investment. In the 1980s the Van Vleck family donated the collection to the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Mueller leads off the catalogue with ‘Establishing a Lineage: The Utagawa School and Japan’s Print Culture’, a fine essay describing the emergence of the Utagawa house in the dog-eat-dog market of *ukiyo-e*. The school’s founder, Utagawa Toyoharu (1735–1814), designed a number of *ukiyo-e* (‘floating pictures’) that adapted one-point perspective to depict the famous sites around Edo (as well as fantastical rep-



199. Utagawa Toyokuni, *Interior of the Kawarazakiya Theatre*, 1794, woodcut, *ōban* triptych, 356 × 717 mm (Madison, WI, Chazen Museum of Art, Bequest of John H. Van Vleck).

representations of distant places, including Holland and China). Toyoharu established his own atelier and line, training two artists who in turn founded the most important branches of the school, Utagawa Toyohiro (1773–1828) and Utagawa Toyokuni (1769–1825). Toyohiro and Toyokuni likewise trained descendants. Toyohiro's most famous student was Utagawa Hiroshige (1797–1858), and Toyokuni's were the exceedingly successful Utagawa Kunisada (1786–1865) and the ever inventive Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1798–1861). Mueller rightly extends the Utagawa legacy into the Meiji period (1868–1912), after Japan rapidly transformed itself into a Westernized power, to include Kunisada's best student, Toyohara Kunichika (1835–1900), and Kuniyoshi's most innovative ones, Kawanabe Kyōsai (1831–89) and Tsukioka Yoshitoshi (1839–92).

These are only the most prominent Utagawa artists in a school that, as Mueller writes, was 'responsible for over half of all extant *ukiyo-e* prints . . . and included an extensive roster of hundreds of designers who at some time worked under the Utagawa name or claimed ties to its artistic lineage' (p. 13). To be sure, the Utagawa school, on the strength of numbers alone, became a dominant presence in *ukiyo-e*. This catalogue's reappraisal of the school gives them due appreciation, but this need not be done on quantity alone. Fortunately, many of its members were also very talented designers, worthy competitors to acclaimed masters such as Kitagawa Utamaro (1753?–1806) and Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849), among others.

Kobayashi Tadashi raises important issues about the production of images in the essay, 'Ukiyo-e Artists and Their Patrons: The Case of Utagawa Kunisada (Toyokuni III) and the Wealthy Merchant Mitani Chōzaburō'. Significantly, he describes the printing process, placing not the *artist* but the *publisher* at the place of its origin; this rightly acknowledges that prints were a commercial enterprise, underwritten by a merchant and designed to sell. Although somewhat lengthy, Kobayashi's description of the process of making prints is worth quoting:

The production of these prints during the Edo period followed an involved process. The print publisher (*hanmoto*) planned a new polychrome woodblock print as a commercial product. He commissioned an artist or draftsman to create a preparatory drawing for the main image, made up largely of lines of black ink. If the preparatory drawing met with the publisher's approval, he then sought permission from a sanctioned government official or censor to publish the design, receiving a stamp of approval most commonly in the form of '*kiwame*' (approved), or '*aratame*' (examined). After the appropriate approval, production of the print would commence (p. 23).

Here, Kobayashi clearly states a fact too often overlooked (or willfully ignored) in *ukiyo-e* studies: that for commercial printing (leaving aside examples of private commission) the

publishers called the shots. This overturns the too frequently asserted, and ultimately incorrect, model wherein the artist controls the print production and his market. Like cinema today, *ukiyo-e* was a for-profit venture, where the publisher as producer controlled the process and took carefully calculated risks.

Kobayashi also notes that in the further stages of print-making, after the design was accepted, the carver would produce the key block and pull the test proof; the artist would then add colours to the proof. Subsequent colour blocks would be carved to match the artist's designs. The prints would be returned to the publisher for sale, as Kobayashi states:

The finished polychrome print would normally be sent to the publisher in batches of two hundred sheets, the approximate number of prints that a printer could produce in a single day. The publisher would then put the prints on display in the front of his shop, known as an *ezōshiya*, which was similar to today's bookshops. He also might have authorized other *ezōshiya* shops to sell the prints (p. 23).

Although the number of prints produced per day as well as other details probably varied over the period, this description provides a good benchmark for the general process. The fact that the publisher might authorize another shop to distribute his product serves as another marker of his ownership of the completed image. There was no official copyright law in Edo Japan; instead, the owner of the woodblocks, usually the publisher, 'owned' the content. Pirating designs and stories was not unusual in the cut-throat world of Edo publishing; such disputes were settled by the publishing guilds and owning the blocks was vital to proving rights to content.

After setting up this paradigm, Kobayashi considers the information that survives on a selected number of Kunisada designs. In these rare drawings the artist has included notations directed to the patron of the prints and to the publisher. This evidence demonstrates that the publisher, Ebisuya Shōshichi, and a well-to-do merchant, Mitani Chōzaburō, were co-investors in a series of images by Kunisada that were never realized as completed polychrome prints. The artist's notations on the proof sheets request the services of the most highly regarded carver, Horitake, to transfer the details of the image to the woodblocks, indicating his concerns that the prints should reflect his intentions. This case exemplifies an unusual collaboration between publisher and investor, and it also indicates how an artist – even one as famous as Kunisada – was required to appeal for the consideration of the publisher in the final production of his images. Again, the artist-as-creator model is proven inconsistent with actual practice: the publisher remains at the centre of production throughout.

In the next essay Fujisawa Akane engages Utagawa connections between the School and the Kabuki theatre, be-

1. Citation on p. 35 to Iijima Kyoshin, *Ukiyoeshi Utagawa retsuden*, edited by Tamabayashi Haruo (Tokyo 1896, 1941, reprinted

1993), p. 51.

ginning with the epigraph, 'Kabuki made Toyokuni, and Toyokuni made Kabuki'. Iijima Kyoshin (1841–1901) made this telling observation in the *Ukiyoshi Utagawa retsuden* ('Biographies of the Utagawa School of Ukiyo-e Masters').<sup>1</sup> To be sure, Toyokuni's career as an artist was sustained by designing sheet prints, books, programmes and other paraphernalia for the Kabuki market, and his teacher, peers and students also designed for the theatre. More compelling is Kyoshin's assertion that Toyokuni shaped Kabuki, and here, as Akane shows, the image popularized the actor, affected fashion, placed products and influenced staging. How and when theatre prints (fig. 199) were made and how individual artists in the school negotiated their relationship to the theatre are also discussed, in a process where the prints reflected and influenced their subject. As Akane writes, it was like '*drawing kabuki, acting an ukiyo-e print*' (italics in original, p. 35).

Ellis Tinios, in the fourth overview essay 'Warrior Prints and the Double-edged Sword of Loyalty', considers another major subject engaged by the Utagawa School. Tinios pursues the possibility that warrior prints not only showed their subjects as heroes, but perhaps had a secondary intention and effect of being subversive statements on warrior culture. Throughout its rule (1615–1868) the Tokugawa shogunate remained ever sensitive to the power of print to inflame dissent, and it banned the representation of current events, politics and history after 1573 from commercial print production. To dodge these restrictions, playwrights, novelists, *ukiyo-e* designers and publishers, among others, often reset a known event centuries into the past, disguising their potential critique in historical obfuscation. Sometimes it worked, but often it was done so transparently – for example, the stage use of the name 'Hisayoshi' hardly disguised its historical precedent, the sixteenth-century warlord Toyotomi Hideyoshi – that it served as a pretence of obedience, appearing to respect the restrictions while fooling few. Here, Tinios selects a number of cases wherein the 'sword of loyalty' cut both ways, taking particular note of Utagawa School contributions to the warrior print genre. Tinios handles the subject with aplomb and clear mastery.

Mueller closes out the overview essay portion of the catalogue with 'Creative Specialization and Collaborative Projects', bringing together many of the issues raised by the previous authors. In her description of the cultural world of Edo, she reiterates the notion that urbanites increasingly explored a wide range of entertainments, and that

... the term *Edokko* [child of Edo] became democratized as the barriers of status and entitlement eroded to include ... the establishment of a 'common culture.' This was a culture for the common man – including craftsmen, small merchants, firemen, and often the women who had various familial or social relationships to them – who worked hard and prospered, enabling them to enjoy the many offerings of the great metropolis' (p. 46).

While this is not an unusual description of the period, it is increasingly difficult to countenance when one considers the ongoing restrictions on status and movement active in the period. Given that many artists, writers, actors and others were repeatedly censored, edicts were regularly promulgated to enforce social distinctions, and that political and military power continued to be carried out in literal, perpetual and penal actions, it is time that this characterization be reconsidered or at least more fully nuanced. Mueller's admirable discussion of the ways in which Utagawa artists became defined in the field, were noted for particular skills and participated in collaborative projects, responding to and shaping the tastes of their audience, would have also benefited by further reflections on the implications brought forward by the other authors. For publishers and the artists alike, market share and continued sales remained motivating factors in the production of these printed works.

Following these essays, the book becomes a sequence of catalogue entries for specific sheet prints, each illustrated in full colour. These are organized by theme, with separate titles designating their subject: 'Establishing a Name: Utagawa Toyoharu', 'The Studios of Toyohiro and Toyokuni', 'Creative Specialization: Hiroshige, Kuniyoshi, and Kunisada', 'Collaborative Works', 'Utagawa Style and Market Dominance' and 'Claiming the Lineage: Later Artists of the Utagawa School'. These sections highlight the remarkable and diverse creativity of the many artists working under the Utagawa name, and in each of them specific features and meanings of images are clearly detailed. The extensive number of images by each artist allows one to gain a new appreciation for the ways in which the 'legacy' of the Utagawa style was transmitted from one generation to the next. However, because so many prints share similar features, many points about style and content are reiterated in this section (compare, for example, the opening lines in entries 1 and 2). While this is often the case with catalogue entries, for this reader it would have been more beneficial if many of these insights had been brought into the main essays. In addition, since the objects included here are nearly all sheet prints – a restriction no doubt due to the range of the collection – little is said about how different media were handled by these artists. Utagawa artists were, after all, some of the most highly sought book illustrators (especially for popular fiction), and some, such as Toyohiro and Hiroshige, were admired painters in the period. It would have been useful for these kinds of media distinctions and interactions to be brought into the main essays. In the final pages, a set of biographies, lineage diagram and glossary make the catalogue a useful reference work.

The project as a whole will serve to fill a gap in the way we previously considered this extremely successful *ukiyo-e* lineage. Each of the overview essays thoughtfully considers its subject and the catalogue entries make these prints accessi-

2. The term 'common culture' is cited to Henry D. Smith II, 'The Floating World in its Edo Locale 1750–1850', in *The Floating World*

*Revisited*, edited by D. Jenkins and L. Jacobsen-Katsumoto (Portland, OR 1993), pp. 35–38.

ble. The presentation and layout of the book are up to the typical high standards of a Hotei Publishing venture (and in the spirit of full disclosure, I also worked with Hotei on another project), and it is a most welcome addition to the

field. The volume's contributors and, most of all, its organizer are to be congratulated for bringing the Utgawa School to greater appreciation.

## Leopoldo Méndez

Kelly Donahue-Wallace

Deborah Caplow, *Leopoldo Méndez: Revolutionary Art and the Mexican Print*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 2007, 326 pp., 18 col. and 194 b. & w. ills., \$55, £30.

Leopoldo Méndez (1902–69) was a leading figure of the Mexican Renaissance, the period of artistic efflorescence that followed the Mexican Revolution of 1910–20. Although less famous than the 'big three' muralists – Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros – Méndez nevertheless helped to codify the image of post-revolutionary Mexico through his work as a founding member of the Taller de Gráfica Popular (the Popular Graphic Workshop, TGP). Created in 1937 as a collaborative printmaking shop for the dissemination of didactic materials to benefit the Mexican populace, the TGP artists drew inspiration from Mexican printmaker José Guadalupe Posada and the German Expressionists, among others, to make boldly graphic and didactically powerful works combining text and image. Méndez, José Luis Arenal, Pablo O'Higgins, Raul Anguiano, Alfredo Zalce and Xavier Guerrero worked primarily in linocut and lithography, which they combined with typographic text to decry fascism or promote union membership. Like the muralists, the TGP artists deployed in their broadsheets and posters a standard repertoire of characters – the rural *campesino* (farmer), the Indian mother, the urban proletariat, the greedy industrialist – to promote socialist, antifascist and later anti-Cold War messages. The TGP continues today, albeit with a much curtailed productivity.

The Academy-trained Méndez, born into a politically active family in the state of Mexico, briefly explored Abstraction as part of the Estridentismo (Stridentist) movement before embracing an accessible figurative style of printmaking. Robust figures defined by thick hatches and contour lines populate Méndez's woodcut, linocut and metalcut images. In works like *El fusilamiento* ('The Firing Squad'; fig. 200), he exploits the bold graphic potential of the relief medium, recalling the power of Käthe Kollwitz's woodcuts. His lithographs, on the other hand, use rapid and sketchy marks to evoke masses in motion or an economy of sinuous lines to suggest likenesses, as evidenced by his sensitive rendering of Mexican hero Benito Juárez. Invariably

dedicated to leftist social and political causes, Méndez took on fascism, capitalism, nuclear proliferation, Mexican pre-revolutionary history and abuses of power of all kinds. In each image, the common man and woman are the protagonists facing down threats from powerful individuals and institutions.

Deborah Caplow's book joins a handful of other recent texts in expanding the scholarship on Méndez's work; these complement and enrich Helga Prignitz's seminal 1992 study of the TGP. Caplow presents a valuable survey of Méndez's career, with nine chapters following the artist from his formation at the Academy of San Carlos in Mexico City to the last works executed before his death in 1969. As the founder and a lifetime member of the TGP, Méndez's biography is inextricably linked to the press's history, making the book as much about the press as it is about the artist. Caplow developed her narrative with the assistance of Pablo Méndez, Leopoldo's son, as well as from interviews with surviving TGP members, the heirs of those who are not alive and visitors to the press. The TGP artists' personal archives provided additional material. The book consequently offers many hitherto unpublished insights into Méndez's career and TGP operations, in addition to drawing together much of the available primary and secondary literature. Caplow also takes full advantage of US and Mexican collections of TGP work, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the University of California's Bancroft Library and the University of New Mexico's recent acquisitions, and the book is richly illustrated. Its journalistic writing style, periodically punctuated by romantic defences of the artist, is easily accessible for all audiences.

The survey of Méndez's life begins with his formation and the foundation of the Mexican Renaissance; here Caplow establishes the relationship between the printmaker and the more famous Rivera, Orozco and Siqueiros. The second chapter presents Méndez's participation in Estridentismo and its celebration of avant-garde modernity and Mexican revolutionary principles. The next two chapters follow the artist through his increasing engagement with politics and his membership in the *Liga de Escritores y Artistas Revolucionarias* (League of Revolutionary Writers and Artists, LEAR). The