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20th Century Japanese Prints

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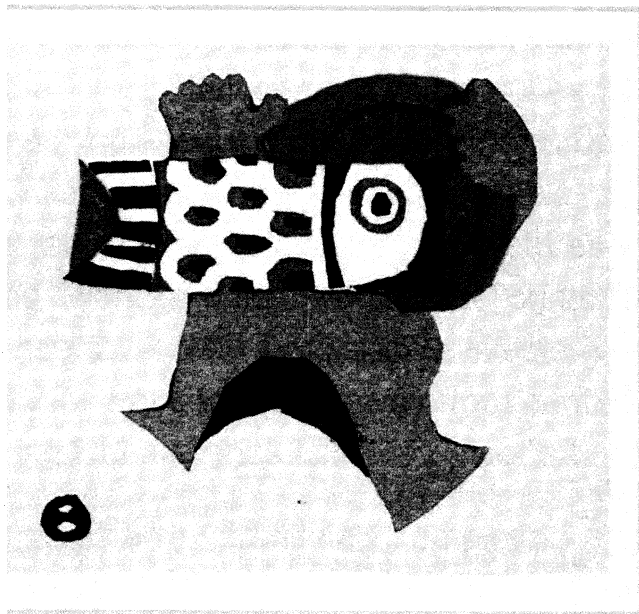
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20TH CENTURY



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P R I N T S

June 23 to August 31, 2006

LA SALLE UNIVERSITY ART MUSEUM

LOWER LEVEL, OLNEY HALL

215-951-1221

20th-Century Japanese Prints

Historical Background: *Ukiyo-e*

In 1854, trade was reestablished between Japan and the West after nearly two centuries of self-imposed isolationism in Japan. In Europe and the United States, the newly available popular Japanese *ukiyo-e* (translated as “pictures of the floating world”) color woodblock prints found immense favor with progressive Western artists looking for ways to break away from centuries of following Renaissance conventions of art.

The Western tradition employed linear perspective and modeling to impart the illusion of a three-dimensional world on a two dimensional picture plane. In Japanese prints, by contrast, bold flat planes of color were laid out in diagonals to infer spatial relationships while at the same time maintaining the flatness of the two dimensional surface. (It is important to note that this perception of flatness is a Western interpretation. The Japanese artists and viewers did not necessarily share the view that the Japanese perspectival system flattens space.)

The Japanese use of unmodeled areas of color and wallpaper-like patterning, as well as overlapping and diagonally-arranged flat planes, representing the concept of recession and projection into space without creating the visual illusion of it, were incorporated into Modern Western Art. The greater abstraction, or simplification of form (from a Western perspective), in Japanese Art was also influential. In fact, Clement Greenberg, the major American formalist critic, characterized the stylistic progression from nineteenth-century Impressionism to twentieth-century Modern Art as a movement towards ever greater abstraction and flatness, culminating in totally abstract and non-objective art that emphasized the two-dimensional quality of the painted or printed surface.

1. Utagawa Kunisada (Toyokuni III)
(1786-1864), Japanese
Flower and Bird, Wind and Moon
or *Famous Beauties*, c. 1847-48
Color woodcut

Kunisada was a prolific and highly regarded figurative artist. This Kunisada image demonstrates some of the key stylistic characteristics of *ukiyo-e* popular woodblock prints. Outlined forms arranged along diagonals draw the eye through the composition from the woman and up and around to the billowing textiles above her. The wall-paper-like patterns, contained within black boundary lines, accentuate the flatness of the surface while folds and undulating lines imply volume. This print is the right panel of a triptych, depicting a window being blown open and figures responding to it. The illustration is possibly for *The Tales of Genji*,¹ the world's first novel, written in the 11th century by Lady Murasaki Shikibu, and also an actor portrait of a male Kabuki actor who specialized in feminine roles.²

¹ Op. cit. Kunisada Project, <http://www.Kunisada.de>

² Seth Baldwin pointed out these two possibilities in his paper, "Utagawa Kunisada and his *Kacho Fugetsu no Uchi* Series," written for Professor

2. Kunisada II (1823-1880), Japanese *Gokuin Sen'emon*, after 1848 Color woodcut

Kunisada II took the name of his instructor, as was the custom for Japanese artists. This is a portrait of a Kabuki theater actor. (*Gokuin Sen'emon*³ is a character in the play *Otokodate itsutsu karigane*.) Woodblock prints were an inexpensive, popular (as in appealing to the general public, rather than an elite audience) medium and Kabuki actor portraits were among some of the most in-demand subjects for prints. The authorities, however, considered popular theater a threat to morality. A censor's prohibition in 1842 meant that portraits could no longer be in "big head" (head and shoulders) format, hence the adoption of the full-length figure. Artists also got around the ban by ceasing to include actors' names as text within their prints, although contemporaries would have been able to guess whose portrait they were buying.

Julie Davis' University of Pennsylvania art history 513 course in Fall 2005.

³ Daniel Lemoine included the title translation in his paper, "Attributed to Utagawa Kunisada" written for Professor Julie Davis' University of Pennsylvania art history 513 course in Fall 2005.

**3. Toyohara Chikanobu (1838-1912),
Japanese
*Eastern Manners and Customs: Tenth
Month in the Annual Events, 1880*
Color woodcut**

Once Japanese ports were reopened to trade, demand grew for Western goods. Especially after the capital of Japan moved to Tokyo in 1869, print artists accommodated new tastes for modernization and Westernization. It is in the context of the rapid cultural changes of this period (the Meiji period) that Chikanobu depicts this mother and child in traditional Japanese attire, rather than modern Western garb, and with teeth blackened in accordance with ancient custom.⁴ This custom not only fell out of favor during the Meiji era, but was legally banned.

⁴ Stacey Lloyd wrote about the context and custom of teeth blackening, *Ohaguro*, in her paper, "Japanese Meiji Prints: A Closer Look," written for Professor Julie Davis' University of Pennsylvania art history 513 course in Fall 2005.

20th-Century Japanese Prints: *Shin Hanga*

By the turn of the century, the *ukiyo-e* woodblock print tradition had largely stagnated. In the early twentieth century, a new movement began, *shin hanga*, literally “new prints.” *Shin hanga* artists sought to update the woodcut medium by depicting scenes of contemporary life, such as Tokuriki Tomikichiro’s *Bridge*. Tomikichiro makes reference to the tradition of depicting a view and updates it by choosing a contemporary subject, a bridge constructed from the relatively new, industrial building material, iron. In Japan, subject-matter that could be deemed mundane, such as this bridge, was widely accepted as an appropriate topic for art. This was yet another inspiration to Western artists who observed the range of every-day life subjects in *ukiyo-e* prints, in the nineteenth century, and adopted similar themes themselves. The asymmetry and the way the composition cuts off the bridge rather than enclosing it within the frame is, again, another hallmark of the Japanese aesthetic and one adopted by Western artists like Edgar Degas in the second half of the nineteenth century.

4. Tomikichiro Tokuriki (1902-1999),
Japanese
Bridge, after 1923
Color woodcut

Tokuriki comes from a family with an unbroken line of artists, all members of the Kano school, dating back to the Keicho era (1596-1615). Tomikichiro's style bridges *shin hanga* (new prints) and *sōsaku hanga* (creative prints). In this more *shin hanga*-like work, the subject matter is a very modern-for-its-time iron bridge. The artist has cut off the bridge on the right side. In pre-Modern Western Art, traditionally, objects would be arranged and contained within the composition. In Japanese Art, asymmetry and this snap-shot aesthetic of cutting through objects were common conventions. Tokuriki worked in more conservative, traditional Kyoto where artists did not feel the same impetus to react against the tradition of *ukiyo-e* as artists in the epicenter of *ukiyo-e* production, Tokyo. Tokuriki continued to make popular, marketable prints, such as this one that displays much in common with traditional *ukiyo-e*, throughout his career to subsidize his creative prints.

20th-Century Japanese Prints: *Sōsaku Hanga* and After

Once trade was reestablished with the West in 1854, Japanese artists became more aware of Western Art. Japanese Art had a major impact on Modern Art in Europe and the United States. In Japan, the counter influence of the West was also felt. Some Japanese artists visited, studied, and worked in Western art centers, especially Paris. The adoption of European techniques such as subtle modeling and aerial perspective—allowing colors to become less intense to infer recession—began to appear in Japanese prints from about 1880.

The twentieth-century woodblock print movement, *sōsaku hanga*, most commonly translated as “creative prints,” sought to modernize style, not just subject matter. Unlike *ukiyo-e*, *sōsaku hanga* prints were not popular prints created for a popular market. *Ukiyo-e* images were marked not only with the artist’s signature and title but also with approval marks from censors, as prints were regulated like the written “press,” and often the patron’s stamp(s)

to show ownership. The twentieth-century artists aspired to the status held by painting. Many limited the number of prints in an edition to avoid associations between multiple reproductions and commonness.

In addition to the style or look of Western Modern Art, Japanese artists were influenced by the individualism of western modernists. Modern Japanese artists aspired to create work that was original and unique rather than copying from the *ukiyo-e* artists of the past. This contrasts with the tradition in which Kunisada II borrowed his name from his teacher and father-in-law Kunisada I, who had likewise used the name of his master, Utagawa Toyokuni. (Kunisada I signed his work "Toyokuni III" after Toyokuni died and Kunisada became head of the Utagawa school.) In the older tradition, mentoring was highly valued.

Collaboration had also been integral to the production of prints. Different individuals specialized in the design, preparation of the block, and the printing. In contrast, *sōsaku hanga* printmakers, following the lead of Yamamoto Kanae in 1904, created and printed their works

themselves following the example of European artists.⁵ Kanae also experimented with cutting the wood block across the grain as the Europeans did, but abandoned the practice for the Japanese convention of cutting along the block, which remains the prevailing Japanese method to this day. The supremacy of the woodcut or woodblock print as a medium, however, has been challenged. Since 1950, more and more Japanese printmakers have turned to traditional European intaglio methods of etching, aquatint, mezzotint, and engraving as well as to other printmaking media such as silk-screen.

The commercial printer Shōsaborō Watanabe (not to be confused with the printmaker, Sadao Watanabe) reported that the market for *sōsaku hanga* prints came largely from foreign, Western collectors.⁶ The prints continued to find Western buyers through the 1930's. Increasing distrust of the West by conservative nationalists in Japan contributed to the lack of Japanese interest in

⁵ Frank L. Chance and Matthew Mizenko, *Modern Impressions: Japanese Prints from the Berman and Corazza Collections: 1950-1980* (Collegeville, PA: Philip and Muriel Berman Museum of Art at Ursinus College, 2005), pp. 9-10.

⁶ Lawrence Smith, *The Japanese Print Since 1900: Old Dreams and New Visions* (New York: Harper and Row, 1983), p. 16-17.

sōsaku hanga. Relations between Japan and Western countries cooled considerably in the years leading up to World War II resulting in the loss of the Western art market for Japanese prints. After the interruption of war, *sōsaku hanga* found renewed interest amongst the artists themselves and amongst a new market of Japanese patrons. The acceptance and demand for these prints by Japanese buyers was really a post war phenomenon. The very fact that this artwork was not nationalistic and did not reference Japanese history made it more palatable for a defeated Japan.⁷

Sōsaku hanga was very much in conversation with developments in Western Modernism and often tended towards abstraction and non-objective compositions. The style peaked in the 1950s and 1960s — the years following World War II — contemporaneous with Abstract Expressionism in the United States. (In both countries, many artists chose to create art without subject matter in the years after the war. For some artists, this choice was due at least in part to a reaction to the war or post-war period and the

⁷ See brief discussion in Lawrence, pp. 24-25.

feeling that it was either impossible or unsafe to deal directly or objectively with the war's legacy. Similarly, some artists considered abstraction a more direct way to express emotion without the distraction of narrative content.) The works in this exhibition include both abstract compositions and more stylistically conservative figurative compositions. Many of the prints on view are woodcuts. Others include print media first developed in Europe, such as etching (see #10, #12, and #16) and lithography (#6).

Ironically, those qualities of traditional Japanese art that influenced Western artists in moving towards flatness and abstraction became key qualities of Western Modernism, which in turn influenced Japanese modern artists looking at Western Art. Mathew Mizenko asserts that the flattening in modern Japanese prints has the effect of making all areas of the composition equal in value.⁸ This same concept informed the "all over" compositions of Abstract Expressionism in the United States. Again, this concept in the United States originated from artists in the West looking to the East for inspiration. This concept of

⁸ Ibid., p. 11.

the “democracy of the canvas” is closely tied to Buddhism and Eastern philosophy. Mizenko further ties the new flatness to the artists’ perception of the flatness of contemporary culture, wherein categories like high and low and Japanese and non-Japanese have been compressed.⁹ Further, the impact of Japan’s World War II defeat caused a break with tradition. In contemporary art, Mizenko argues, traditional Japanese forms and subjects are quoted but lack their historical content.¹⁰

In the 1960s, younger artists rejected the European focus of *sōsaku hanga* in favor of the by then dominant American Art scene. Japanese artists now visited, studied, and worked in the United States, rather than in Paris. Japanese creative prints (creative in the sense of being original, non-commercial artworks, although many younger artists did not take the mantle of *sōsaku hanga*) became larger in scale. The increased scale emphasized that these were to be seen as serious works of art, not popular prints.

⁹ Ibid., p. 11.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 11.

5. Matsumoto Akira (1936—), Japanese
***An Extra Newspaper*, 1964**
Color woodcut

In Akira's *An Extra Newspaper*, the flatness of the subject lends itself to the preservation of the two-dimensional picture plane. Even so, in this abstracted composition the flat planes do not all appear to rest on the same level. Because the eye reads cool colors as tending to recede and warm colors as tending to come forward,¹¹ the red squares look as if they float above the gray tabletop, which appears to be underneath. The cool off-white, rectangular forms at the corners also appear to be above the gray form, even though they are cool-toned. The way that the edge of the composition cuts these forms off contributes to the illusion that they are overlapping and laying on top of the gray form.

¹¹ Painter Hans Hoffman taught this concept, which he called "push pull" in New York in the 1930s-1950s.

6. Kojin Toneyama (1921 —), Japanese

Ancient Time, 1969

Color lithograph

In 1974, Toneyama published a book, *The Popular Arts of Mexico*. The simplified, iconic forms of *Ancient Time* draw on Toneyama's deep appreciation of the indigenous, ancient art forms of Mexican Art, especially Mayan and Aztec Arts. Toneyama made frequent visits to Mexico and was greatly affected by Mexican mural painting as well. The Mexican murals inspired him to create wall art in variety of media from painting to glass mosaic for the school where he himself taught from 1960, Seitoku Gakuen.

7. Sadao Watanabe (1913-1996), Japanese

Woman of Canaan, 1964

Stencil dye-print on yellow homemade paper

Watanabe was a devout Christian who worked with Christian themes in a style referencing Japanese folk art. He wanted to translate the Christian iconography into visual language that would be more familiar to a Japanese audience. Watanabe first came into contact with the folk art

movement, *mingei*, in Japan as a textile dyer when he was in his mid-twenties. In his prints, he chose the colors of stencil-dyed cloths. He also used a somewhat cloth-like, traditional, crinkled handmade paper made from mulberry trees by specialists employing a centuries-old technique.

8. Nagao Ueno (1904-1974), Japanese
***Recollection of the Past*, 1964**
Woodcut in 4 colors

Ueno's woodcut has a playful, lively feel to it and a look similar to European abstract art. Even though its title suggests that it is about something, there is no recognizable subject matter. The focus is instead colors and shapes. Even so, the title is evocative and invites the viewer to come up with his or her own interpretation.

9. Reika Iwami (1927—), Japanese

Sea, Evening Calm, 1964

Woodcut in 4 colors

Iwami is a Toyko-based artist and co-founder of the women printmakers' association *Joryū Hanga Kyōkai*. Iwami's prints are abstract but reference natural elements and emphasize the natural quality of the wood grain in the wood blocks from which she prints. In addition to the wood grain, her prints typically also suggest water and, less often, other elements and she often employs embossing and gold leaf. Although, not landscapes in the conventional sense, Iwami represents the elemental qualities of earth, fire, water, wind, and sky through texture. About *Sea, Evening Calm*, she writes:

*The Ocean, with its limitless breadth and scope
Embraces all deep in its heart;
The anger, too, of the bitter and tempestuous night.
Peace descends silently in the distant horizon.
I love the Ocean.*

-Reika Iwami

10. Shigeki Kuroda (1953 —), Japanese
Bicycle R.55, 1980
Etching

Kuroda is a Yokohama-based contemporary artist. He is especially known for his images of bicyclists carrying umbrellas, which he began creating in the 1970s. He masses together and blurs the figures to create the illusion of motion. In this composition, this imparts a look reminiscent of earlier twentieth-century European Futurism. His stated intention is to "express the change, flow and expanse of time in a pictorial dimension."¹² He works with the intaglio print medium of etching, which has its roots in Europe, rather than Japan. His adoption of this technique is another example of how contemporary Japanese Art has been influenced by the West.

11. Hiroyuki Tajima (1911-1984), Japanese
Green Castle Gate, 1972
Color woodcut

¹² As quoted by Castle Fine Arts, Artists' Bios: Shigeki Kuroda (Delmar, CA: <http://www.castlefinearts.com>)

Like Watanabe, Tajima had training in fabric dyeing in addition to printmaking. His work fuses traditions of Japanese calligraphy, painting, and Zen Buddhism with Modernist interests in depicting forms, colors, light and texture in his abstractions. Tajima joined the *Bijutsu Bunka Kyokai*, a printmaking group that supported a revival of surrealist and abstract art, in 1946 and is one of the leading post-war printmakers.

12. Shogo Okamoto (1920-2001), Japanese
***Bamboo Woods*, 1972**
Color etching

Okomoto was especially known for his depictions of trees and for his ability to depict the variety within a group of trees. Although he occasionally depicted dwellings (see *Evening* in the Modernism print gallery), he focused on nature without a human presence.

13. Umetaro Azechi (1902-1999), Japanese
Pisces
Color Woodcut

**14. Umetaro Azechi (1902-1999), Japanese
Village
Color Woodcut**

Azechi is considered a self-taught artist. His style is purposefully naive and influenced by folk art. Azechi grew up in rural poverty. His father was an amateur wood carver and Azechi recalls watching him ink a carved mask and use it as a woodblock for printing an impression on paper.¹³ His first art training was by correspondence course. He later moved to Tokyo and while accepted to art school could not attend due to lack of funds. Azechi describes his early experience with printmaking as experiments with the engraving equipment at his government printing job.¹⁴ He showed some of the impressions he made to the print artist Un'ichi Hiratsuka who encouraged him to submit his work to publications and exhibitions, thus beginning his official artistic career.

**15. Joichi Hoshi (1913-1979), Japanese
Red Branches, 1973
Color woodcut**

¹³ Oliver Statler, *Modern Japanese Prints: An Art Reborn* (Rutland, Vt., Charles E. Tuttle Co. [1956]), p. 138.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

Hoshi was educated in Taiwan and returned to Japan after World War II. At that time, he undertook study in oil painting. Like several of the other artists whose prints are on display, he favored nature subjects. He began with stars and constellations but switched to trees by the 1970s. Like Okamoto, he is known for his depictions of trees. Unlike Okomoto, who creates color etchings, Hoshi works in the traditional medium of woodcut. Hoshi also more often focuses on one, leafless, iconic tree rather than on a group.

16. Tanaka Ryohei (1933—), Japanese
***A House*, 1972**
Etching

Ryohei did not begin study as a printmaker until 1963. His etchings are distinguished by their high level of detail and mastery of the medium. Ryohei is interested in depicting man with nature. He often chooses subjects, such as this house, which show a traditional form of architecture that is quickly disappearing.

17. Joichi Hoshi (1913-1979), Japanese
***Tall Treetops*, 1976**
Color woodcut



The exhibition continues in the Modern Hall at the end of the main hallway. (Turn right to enter the Modern and Contemporary Galleries.) In addition to Japanese prints, there are prints by American printmaker Ansei Uchima, whose father was Japanese and whose work consciously engaged with that Japanese heritage, and prints by two Americans working in a japonist (Japanese-inspired) style, Bertha Clausen Jaques and Lillian May Miller.

Carmen Vendelin
Assistant Curator of Art

