

## JAPANESE UKIYO-E PRINTS

Japanese prints are the most popular form of Asian art in the West. Their images and ideas have been reproduced in all levels of art from Van Gogh to souvenir purses. The most famous kind of Japanese print is the *Ukiyo-e* type.

**TERM** *Ukiyo-e* translates into “pictures (*e*) of the floating world (*ukiyo*).” The term *ukiyo* was a Medieval Buddhist concept of the transience of life in this “world of suffering.” It was a derogatory word referring to the pleasures of money and material things that are not worthy of the soul’s striving.

By the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the term was used as an excuse to enjoy frivolous, extravagant, pleasurable pastimes. It came to broadly refer to the world of everyday life and pleasure: theater, dancing, festivals, and love.<sup>1</sup> *Ukiyo-e* used as a painting term means illustrations of genre or daily life scenes. Instances of genre in Japanese art appear as early as the 12<sup>th</sup> century, but it was in the late 16<sup>th</sup>/early 17<sup>th</sup> century that it became more widespread and popular.

**PATRONS** This change occurred in response to a new clientele of patrons. In contrast to the patrons of the royal court and the Buddhist temples, this was a new class of common people without old traditions to keep alive. With the prosperity of the Edo period (1600-1868) and the growth of the cities, a new, extremely prosperous merchant class arose. However, the Shogunal government set up a strict class system, placing these people near the bottom socially. The government passed sumptuary laws limiting ways people could display their wealth.

The Yoshiwara brothel district in Edo was one place where these merchants could spend their newly acquired wealth. Another place was the Kabuki theaters. The beauties of the Yoshiwara and the actors in Kabuki plays thus became the two most popular subjects for artists and later printmakers who catered to the tastes of the middle class. For the common person who could not afford a painting, a print was an affordable alternative.

**TECHNIQUE** Woodblock prints were produced entirely by hand; a printing press was not used. It was a complex process that involved at least five people.

(1) The *artist/designer* drew the initial sketch with black ink on white paper that was sized for correct dimensions to the woodblock.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted and paraphrased from Richard Illing, *The Art of Japanese Prints*, (London: John Calmann & Cooper Limited, 1980), p. 19.

- TECHNIQUE
- (2) A skilled *copyist* would then trace the original design onto thin paper, refining the lines for the engraver.
  - (3) The *wood engraver* pasted the paper face down on a block of seasoned cherry wood. The blocks were made to fit various paper sizes. Using hemp seed oil to make it transparent, the block was then carved using a variety of chisels and cutting tools, leaving the design standing out in relief in reverse image.
  - (4) The *printer* registered colors by using *kento*, a ridge where they could key each print. Each color had to be stamped on the paper separately, thus each color required a separate block. The printer knelt or sat in front of the block surrounded by brushes and dishes of inks, dyes, and pigments.<sup>2</sup> The printer applied ink and colors directly onto the block and then laid moistened mulberry paper over it, impressed it, and left it for a few hours. The printer created a gradation of color by carefully wiping away some of the pigment from the block. The finished print was then hung up to dry, trimmed, and put out for sale.
  - (5) The *publisher* employed the artist, engraver, and printer. Publishers were not only in charge of selling the prints, they also often proposed ideas to artists and dictated the subject matter and style. After 1790 print designs had to be submitted to government censors for approval. Often the seal of the censor was included in the print along with the artist's signature and seal, and the publisher's seal.

MEDIA

Pigments: a guide<sup>3</sup>

sumi: black ink made from pine soot and glue

red: made from lead oxide or St. John's wort

pink: made from safflower

yellow: made from turmeric or yellow ochre

olive: made from turmeric or yellow ochre mixed with indigo

orange: made from iron oxide

green: made from verdigris green or bronze patina

violet: made from shoenji and indigo

lilac purple: made from indigo and carmine

blue: made from Mercurialis leiocarpa or algae

gray: made from sumi mixed with lead-white and mica

Prussian blue: imported from Europe ca. 1820, a deep blue

aniline colors: introduced after 1860

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<sup>2</sup> Illing, p. 8.

<sup>3</sup> From Richard Lane, *Images from the Floating World: The Japanese Print*, (New Jersey: Chartwell Books, Inc., 1978), p. 311.

FORMATS AND  
SPECIAL PRINTS

Japanese prints were made in all sizes, the most common being *oban*, which measures approximately 15 x 10 inches (38 x 25 cm). Most Japanese prints were not hung up, but rather were placed into albums that one could leaf through.

In order to get around sumptuary laws governing the size of prints, artists began to create sets that would form *trptychs* when put together by the purchaser.



Koryusai, *Young Man with Umbrella*. Oban triptych, early 1770. 74.1.305.

In Japan, fans were an important accessory for women's and men's attire. *Fan prints* were produced to give the consumer an ever-changing range of fan design options. The prints mounted onto frames or in albums are relatively rare because, as mere accessories, they were discarded when they became dirty or damaged. Artists showed a great deal of ingenuity by accommodating their compositions to the fan shape.



Hiroshige, *Courtesans Visiting a Temple at Dawn*. Woodblock fan print. 1855. Toshiba Gallery of Japanese Art, Victoria and Albert Museum.

*Pillar Prints*

*Pillar prints (hashira-e)* were narrow, vertical prints made by pasting together two sheets of paper. They measured around 29 x 5 inches (68 x 12 cm), although the size varied in each period. Their unusual format presented a great challenge to print artists. The traditional Japanese house had very few walls, and the sliding doors which divided the rooms were made of paper. Wooden pillars were one of the few places where one could hang pictures. Because pillar prints were exposed to dirt and damage, today they are extremely rare. The Institute owns a small, but choice collection.

Shunsho, *Hana-ogi*,  
1790, 74.1.132 (left);  
Hiroshige, *Bunting on  
Convolvulus*, 1830-



*Surimono*

*Surimono* were privately commissioned prints used as greeting cards and invitations. They were created by the most famous artists and are often of the finest quality. Artists lavished extraordinary care on the print design and its execution, usually using the latest innovative techniques. *Surimono* commonly depict symbols of good luck, longevity, and happiness.



Hiroshige, *Morning Glories*.

Hokusai: *Horse Money*, 1822,  
74.1.200 (left); Hokkei,  
*Mandarin Duck and Drake*, c.  
1830, 74.1.253 (right).

STYLE

Ukiyo-e style is a decorative one—focusing on broad shapes, patterns, the play of line, and contrasting colors. The following are general characteristics found in most, but not all ukiyo-e prints.

**Composition**

- composed on parallel planes
- overlapping figures are placed in a carefully articulated, shallow space
- compositions often have a diagonal thrust
- asymmetrical compositions
- random groupings of isolated images
- tilting up of the picture plane; the composition goes up and back to create an illusion of depth, this is in contrast to the linear perspective of the West
- cropping of figures in compositions

**Shapes**

- flattened shapes, often done in silhouette
- careful arrangement of color shapes
- daring use of foreshortening

**Line**

- figures often are modeled by line alone, using no shading
- some prints try to capture the fluid liquidity of brushwork seen in painting

**Color**

- artists often use colors that are more unusual and striking rather than purely descriptive, such as a teal-colored field.

SUBJECT MATTER  
*Bijin-ga*  
(Beautiful  
Women)

A large percentage of Ukiyo-e prints fall into the category of *shunga* or “spring pictures.” These are erotic prints of an often explicit nature. Most artists designed *shunga* as regular prints of courtesans and ordinary women. The production of *shunga* came in waves depending on the censorship climate of the Tokugawa government.

Most of the courtesans depicted in ukiyo-e were higher class prostitutes, licensed by the government to practice within the confines of the Yoshiwara district. Many of these women were educated and talented in music and literature. They were the fashion trendsetters of the day. More rarely, lower class prostitutes were depicted, usually carrying a rolled up mat by a bridge, where they plied their illegal trade. Lightly suggestive pictures (*obunai*) where, for example, a woman’s kimono would fall open, were extremely popular. Artists were also interested in depicting regular women doing such things as visiting shrines and taking care of children. Other types of women who fell in between these categories were tea

**SUBJECT MATTER** hostesses, actresses, and geisha (women entertainers and party hostesses). These women were usually depicted in a Yoshiwara setting.  
*Bijin-ga*  
(Beautiful Women), cont.

Clues to a woman's status and role are found in her dress, hairstyle, posture, and gestures. Occasionally her name and perhaps her brothel or tea house are mentioned. The faces of these beautiful people depicted are pleasant, but emotionless.

Basic Visual Clues to Prostitutes vs. Ordinary women:

Prostitutes

*obi* knot tied in the front  
indoors go barefoot  
in the winter wear high clogs (*geta*)  
carry rolled up paper tissues to tryst

Ordinary Women

*obi* knot tied in back  
indoors wear *tabi* socks

Displays of necks and feet were considered very erotic. A slight slip, showing the innermost red kimono, too, was considered exciting and coquettish.

*Kabuki Theater*

In contrast to the highly formalized, subtle, and traditional *No* theater, *Kabuki* theater splashed on the scene with vivid gestures, colorful costumes, and highly dramatic storylines. Begun about 1600 by Okuni, the performers were women who performed a licentious dance as a prelude to prostitution. Hoping to stem this, the government decreed that only men could act in these plays. Following this, young boys were recruited, but they too, moonlighted as prostitutes. Finally the government ruled that only older men could become *Kabuki* actors. To make these men less attractive, they were required to shave their top forelocks. Taken out of the arena of prostitution, *Kabuki* theater evolved into a true art form.

*Kabuki* theater was tremendously popular. The major performers were admired in the way our movie idols are today. Fans could collect prints of their favorite actors performing various roles. Some actors specialized in performing female roles (*onna-gata*), so sometimes it is initially difficult to pick out the *Kabuki* actor from the courtesan in prints. The actors always wear a little cloth cap to hide the shaved forelock.

*Landscape*

Towards the end of the 18th and into the 19th century, the Tokugawa government censors started coming down hard. It became more difficult to get pictures of beautiful women approved. The depictions of *bijin-ga* (beautiful women) had been the rage for almost a century and a half, and their popularity was beginning to wane. At the same time there was a growing interest in the country itself. People took to

the road on pilgrimage to visit various holy sites<sup>4</sup> and places of curiosity. Pilgrimage

became very popular, in part, because it was one of the only reasons for travel allowed by the restrictive government—though many pilgrims went because of true religious beliefs. People purchased prints that showed the sights, sounds, and feelings of the various areas they had visited. These prints also allowed those who stayed at home to travel vicariously. Many of the landscape prints are anecdotal and very picturesque.

*Kacho-ga*

Birds and flowers were a traditional subject matter of painting adopted by printmakers. These natural images tended to be associated with seasons, festivals, good wishes, and poetry. Some bird and flower prints were executed in the decorative linear style more closely associated with ukiyo-e, while others approximated the skillful and subtle brushwork associated with painting.

*Legends and Literature*

Japan is a country rich in folklore and historical and mythical legends. Print artists regularly looked to these for iconographic ideas. In addition, artists adopted Kabuki plots, religious legends, and popular stories of loyalty and revenge to create striking prints. In this category also belong images of mythical beasts, terrifying ghosts, and amusing parodies. Some scholars feel that prints of landscape, birds and flowers, and legends do not really qualify as *ukiyo-e* prints, as they do not depict the “floating world.” Most studies, however, readily include these works, as some of the finest prints ever made were done by the artists who worked in these areas.

MAJOR  
ARTISTS

**The early Ukiyo-e artists**

*Moronobu* (active 1670-1694) started the genre style of Ukiyo-e. He was a prolific book illustrator, and published most of his prints in albums. His subject matter was the Yoshiwara district, with a majority of his prints depicting erotic scenes. Moronobu began the ukiyo-e style of bold lines against lovely decorative patterns. His men and women are difficult to differentiate because both genders have stylized faces with slit eyes, hook noses, and rosebud lips.

*Torii Artists*

*Torii Kiyonobu* (ca. 1664-1729) began the Torii school of printmaking, which specialized in portrayals of Kabuki actors. Kiyonobu, as the son of a Kabuki actor, knew the plays and the theatrical world intimately. Focusing on actors, he varied his style depending on the role which the actor was portraying. One style showed the power of a flamboyant acting manner by using thick swirling lines, legs that look like swelling gourds, and a twisted vigor in the positions of the figures to illuminate

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<sup>4</sup> Religious sites included Buddhist, Taoist, and Shinto shrines and holy places.

the bold style of the actors. Illustrating the violent dances of *argoto* roles (“rough stuff”), the actors were at times overwhelmed by their costumes. The second style used a more elegant, quieter look to depict emotional roles.

MAJOR  
ARTISTS

*Okumura Masanobu* (1686-1764): By his own account, Masanobu invented most of the innovations prior to full color printing. He developed the lacquer print, the pillar print, the two color print using pink and green pigments; in addition, he was the first to use Western perspective. Masanobu’s style is extremely graceful and poetic. His figures tend to have large oval heads and dainty arms and hands.

**Early artists of the “brocade” print**

*Suzuki Harunobu* (1725-1770) was the first artist to use the technique of full color printing. He popularized a new aesthetic in female beauty—that of a delicate, ethereal, childlike woman. He was also one of the first to depict ordinary women as well as courtesans. Harunobu was noted as well for his ability to set figures into a true setting instead of against a blank background. He designed over 1,000 prints. He was educated, and his prints often contain literary and poetic references to contemporary and classical writings.

*Katsukawa Shunsho* (1726-1793) specialized in Kabuki actors. He was the first to imbue actors with a sense of individual personality, using a more psychological approach, in which one can recognize actors’ faces. People would buy and collect these like modern day movie star pictures. Shunsho was the first to create elaborate backgrounds for the actor, creating a context for dramatic scenes. He used an angular line in depicting drapery.

**The “Golden Age” (c. 1750-1820)**

*Torii Kiyonaga* (1752-1815) focused on *onbijin-ga* (pretty women). Kiyonaga’s prints have been called classic. His prints are beautifully designed and executed with the background settings laid out in great detail. He truly captured the feeling of being out in the open air. His women are stately and statuesque. They are morerealistic than Harunobu’s, but are still impossibly tall and elegant. His faces exhibit a high degree of idealism and are often indistinguishable from each other. He was noted for his large *Oban* diptychs and triptychs.



MAJOR  
ARTISTS

**The rise of landscape**

*Katsushika Hokusai* (1760-1849): A fantastically creative artist, Hokusai tirelessly produced paintings and prints throughout his long life. He is most famous for his landscape series, especially *36 Views of Mount Fuji*, which featured *The Great Wave*. His landscapes were not just mere backdrops, but rather the human beings became part of the larger, harmonious landscape. His landscapes are only partially based on observation, many of them verging on fantasy. Hokusai experimented with Japanese, Chinese, and Western painting and print styles. Sometimes his works are a strange and wonderful combination of all three. Hokusai also produced a series of drawing books (*manga*) exhibiting his endless curiosity about all things—drawing animals, houses, and humorous depictions of people.

*Ando Hiroshige* (1797-1858) designed over 5,000 prints. Like Hokusai, Hiroshige studied all kinds of painting styles. He traveled with a *daimyo* (a military lord) in a ceremonial procession from Edo to Kyoto. Along the way he filled up notebooks with sketches, and from these he made some of his most famous prints, such as the *100 Views of Edo*. A master of clever composition, he was also able to capture the exact climate and time of day—rain, early evening, fog, and fireworks—all with a clarity of vision. Sometimes Hiroshige focused on something small, like a cat, to create visual interest in an otherwise dull scene.

JAPONISME

Prior to the opening of Japan in 1865, Japanese art in the West was exceedingly rare. In 1867 an exhibition of 100 prints shown at the Japanese pavilion at the Paris Universal Exposition changed that. Suddenly “things Japanese” were all the rage in Europe. Dealers began to stock prints and artists began to avidly collect them. The images seemed shocking, new, and modern. Major artists of the Impressionist, Post Impressionist, and Nabis movements not only experimented with the decorative visual style of the prints, but also adopted their subject matter and formats.

The profound influence of Japanese prints on artists such as Whistler, Manet, Cassatt, Degas, and Vuillard is readily evident in their adoption of dramatic cropping, diagonal compositions, and flat color shapes. Artists found inspiration in the Japanese genre pictures of mothers and prostitutes, as well as pictures of cities and landscapes under all kinds of wind and weather effects. Depictions of Kabuki actors influenced Toulouse-Lautrec’s posters of nightclub performers. Manet borrowed liberally from Hokusai’s *manga* sketchbooks in his prints of everything from market scenes to cats. Gauguin and Bonnard even painted in the traditional Japanese formats of the fan and the folding screen.