

Edo Pop

DURING THE EDO PERIOD (1615–1868), a time of prolonged peace in Japan, urban commoners, known as *chōnin*, became rich providing goods and services in the burgeoning cities. However, the strict stratification of Japanese society prevented *chōnin* from advancing socially. As a result, they pursued hedonistic pleasures and indulged in extravagant pastimes. By the mid-17th century, the *chōnin* were a dynamic cultural force.

Ukiyo-e refers to woodblock prints and paintings depicting the pleasures and pastimes of the *chōnin*. The term means pictures (*e*) of the floating (*uki*) world (*yo*). Coined by a 17th-century writer of popular fiction, Asai Ryōi, it is a play on words. A homonym written with a different character for *uki* had long been used in Buddhist texts to connote the miseries of life on earth. By changing the first character from “misery” to “floating,” Asai cleverly implied that life seemed not dire but pleasure-filled and dreamlike.

Like Pop artists of the 1960s and 1970s in Britain and the United States, *ukiyo-e* artists found inspiration in contemporary urban life, fashion, and new consumer products. Free of the weighty symbolism and moralizing overtones of earlier imagery, *ukiyo-e*

was a buoyant affirmation of modern life. With their fluid, descriptive outlines, novel vantage points, bold colors, and audacious compositions, these works were fresh and seductively hip. But like Pop art, *ukiyo-e* also reflected the disruptiveness of popular culture and the brash, transient, and controversial aspects of contemporary society.

This exhibition showcases two hundred superb woodblock prints from the permanent collection of the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. Mass-produced and relatively inexpensive when they were created, they reflect the tastes and diversions of the *chōnin*—from the courtesans of the licensed pleasure quarters and the dashing actors of the lowbrow Kabuki stage to simpler enjoyments like nature, seasonal celebrations, and travel. These images had a tremendous impact on Western artists beginning in the late 19th century and have provided continuing inspiration to Japanese artists as well. The second half of the exhibition features work by twelve contemporary artists that demonstrates the enduring influence of one of the world’s great artistic traditions.

Beautiful Women

Prostitution was a fact of life during Japan's Edo period, especially in male-dominated urban areas. In the city of Edo (now Tokyo), the headquarters of the shogun, large numbers of feudal lords, warriors, and merchants meant that men outnumbered women two to one. In an attempt to control a potentially disruptive aspect of society and to distance it from respectable society, the government established licensed pleasure quarters on the cities' outskirts. The most famous were the Shimabara in Kyoto (built in 1640), the Shinmachi in Osaka (built in 1631) and the Yoshiwara in Edo (built in 1617 and relocated in 1657).

A visit to these enclaves became an exotic journey, and sexual satisfaction was only part of an evening's entertainment. Courtesans dressed in spectacular and costly garments and wore stylized make-up and elaborate coiffures. Tutors helped them develop social style and artistic skills, including calligraphy, poetry, tea ceremony, and parlor games, as a means of justifying their high prices. Proprietors reasoned

that a more sophisticated clientele would be willing to pay a premium to be among women who were both beautiful and urbane. In this way, the Yoshiwara and other pleasure quarters became the cultural salons of the time. Visitors, in turn, were expected to behave and dress accordingly. Only those possessing wit, knowledge, *savoir faire*—and money—could hope to gain the attentions of the highest-ranking courtesans.

Woodblock print artists pictured these women as embodiments of the feminine ideal. While they focused on high-ranking courtesans, they also depicted geisha (skilled musicians or dancers), courtesans-in-training, teahouse waitresses, and even the wives of wealthy merchants who followed stylish fashion trends. Known as *bijin-ga* (pictures of beautiful women), these idealized images helped perpetuate and heighten the public's fascination with an intoxicating alternate reality that held out the promise of heartrending romance and beauty—however fleeting or illusory.

Kabuki

Kabuki emerged in the early 17th century as a licentious song-and-dance act performed by female troupes at festivals. In an attempt to dictate public morality, the government decreed in 1652 that only adult men could perform on the Kabuki stage. Henceforth, female roles were played by male actors who specialized in evoking femininity through their studied gestures and speech. From its earliest beginnings, Kabuki reflected the interests and tastes of a burgeoning class of commoners who lived and worked in Japan's newly prosperous cities. The plays fell mostly into two categories: warrior tales of bravery and betrayal set in Japan's distant past (sometimes with thinly veiled criticism of contemporary government), and melodramatic domestic dramas sensationalizing actual events—such as the execution of a lovelorn young woman accused of arson, or the double suicides of star-crossed lovers.

Kabuki actors specialized in specific roles and became famous for developing their own styles. In general, Kabuki acting is characterized by exaggerated movements and stylized speech designed to heighten

the dramatic effect. Trap doors, a revolving stage, and an endless array of visual tricks contributed to the surreal—even fantastic—quality of the performances. Stage make-up (*kumadori*), especially for bold and bombastic roles, accentuated the character's personality by exaggerating the muscles and veins around the eyes and mouth. Elaborate costumes, densely embroidered with bright colors and gold threads, added to the sumptuous and vivid effect.

Possibly a full third of all woodblock prints produced during the Edo period were scenes from Kabuki plays. In general, early print artists portrayed theatrical characters in an exaggerated manner, and the representations bore little resemblance to the actors who performed the roles. By the 1770s, however, artists associated with the Katsukawa school began to capture the actors' likenesses more realistically. These images, and those that followed, helped catapult actors to stardom, and many enjoyed cultlike status as fans clamored to purchase images of them in roles they perfected and popularized.

Pleasures and Pastimes

Unprecedented peace and prosperity characterized much of the Edo period (1615–1868), and for the first time in Japan’s long history, the general public engaged in a wide array of leisure pursuits. The licensed pleasure quarters and the Kabuki theater were only part of the thriving cultural milieu enjoyed by commoners. Seasonal and religious festivals, abandoned during wartime, were resurrected and celebrated with renewed zeal. Temple schools and impoverished samurai instructed townspeople in the polite arts. Literary societies formed around famous teachers, and amateur poets gathered to compose verse for special occasions such as New Year’s. Musical performances by members of *koto* (13-stringed zither) and *shamisen* (3-stringed lute) study groups were also a common occurrence, as were dance recitals, tea ceremonies, and flower-arranging exhibitions. Once the exclusive purview of the warrior and aristocratic classes,

these arts came to be enjoyed by a newly wealthy class of urban commoners.

Culinary fare improved, too, and restaurants and teahouses proliferated wherever people gathered. Major intersections and bridges became sites for impromptu performances, itinerant vendors, and fireworks displays. Specialty fairs, often within temple grounds, featured exotic varieties of flowers or local crafts and wrestling matches.

In the 19th century, woodblock print artists capitalized on the expansive interests of the townspeople by picturing these popular pastimes and entertainments. While beautiful women and Kabuki actors remained favorite themes, people also bought images that reflected their particular enthusiasms—mythological and legendary heroes, flora and fauna, classical poetry, and even ghost tales.

Sightseeing and Travel

During the early decades of the Edo period (1615–1868), travel in Japan was dangerous and arduous. However, the shogun's requirement that feudal lords spend half their time at his court in the city of Edo led to roadway improvements and the establishment of checkpoints and relay stations. Towns grew around the stations, with inns, restaurants, teahouses, souvenir shops, and local guides catering to travelers.

Commoners evaded government restrictions on travel by claiming the need to undertake religious pilgrimages to distant temples and shrines. But in fact, these trips became pleasure outings allowing travelers to experience firsthand the scenic beauty of places long lauded in literature and to partake of strange cuisines, puzzle over regional dialects, and marvel at local legends and beliefs.

Printed guidebooks first appeared in the mid-17th century. By the late 18th century, artists were

being commissioned to design illustrated versions—often including maps and aerial views with points of interest clearly marked. The emergence of landscape prints as a separate genre in the 1830s has been linked to the importation of a synthetic blue pigment known as Prussian or Berlin blue, which yielded deeper, richer hues that were less apt to fade. Artists soon capitalized on the opportunity to render the sea, rivers, and sky in a fresh and vivid manner irresistible to their customers.

Although landscape prints could serve as beautiful reminders of a journey to a distant place, most people who bought them probably had little chance to travel. The images provided a vicarious experience, transporting viewers to breathtaking locations far from the problems and inconveniences that vexed their daily lives.

Edo Pop Redux

Following the “opening” of Japan to the Western world in the 1850s, European and American artists rushed to collect Japanese prints and to include many of the stylistic elements—flat areas of strong color, off-center compositions, dramatic cropping—in their own work. Inspired by Japanese prints, some artists pictured street scenes and local landscapes and even controversial elements of society like prostitutes and actors. (A selection of work by 19th-century French artists influenced by Japanese prints is on view in the museum’s Cargill Gallery, on the first floor.)

The impact of Japanese woodblock prints on artists of today is evident in the second part of this exhibition. Work by twelve contemporary artists, both Japanese and Western, demonstrates the enduring artistic and conceptual appeal of themes associated with Japan’s storied “floating world” and aspects of Edo-period society, such as hedonism, decadence, urbanism, sensuality, consumerism, and escapism. Individually sardonic, alien, dreamlike, vibrant, or evocative, taken as a whole these images appropriate past art in a way that reveals our own reality anew.

This exhibition was organized by the Minneapolis Institute of Arts.

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