
Title of Object

Night Scene on Yanagi-bashi Bridge and Restaurant Manhachi

Photo of Object (optional)



Object Information

Artist: Utagawa Hiroshige

Culture: Japanese

Date of Object: c. 1838-1840

Country: Japan

Accession Number: P.75.51.322

File Created: 10/22/2016

Material/Medium: Woodblock print; ink and color on paper

Author of File: Randall Johnson

Department: Japanese and Korean Art

Reviewer of File: Kara ZumBahlen

Last Updated/Reviewed: 6/21/2017

Tour Topics

Passion-place, Group 4, Highlights 1600-1850, Passion for place, food and drink, printmaking, gender roles, women, architecture, water, boats, writing/calligraphy, entertainment, fashion, daily life/genre scene, ukiyo-e print, floating world, Edo period

Questions and Activities (list 3 to 4 sample questions here):

What would it be like to be here?

What part would you play in this scene?

What reasons is one attracted to a place like this?

Key Points (Form: subject matter, medium and techniques of manufacture, style, etc.)

"Ukiyo-e (literally "pictures of the floating world") is the name given to paintings and prints primarily depicting the transitory world of the Yoshiwara—the licensed pleasure quarter and center of social life in the city of Edo (present-day Tokyo) during the Edo period (1615–1868) in Japan. It is a composite term of uki (floating), yo (world), and e (pictures). Originally, ukiyo was a Buddhist term to express the impermanence of human life. During the Edo period, however, ukiyo came to refer to the sensual and

hedonistic pleasures of people, who embraced them all the more for their ever-changing nature.” (Asian Art Museum)

“Yanagi-bashi” translates to “Willow Tree Bridge.” This was one of the “most respectable geisha sectors in Tokyo.” The bridge crossed the Kanda River, and “the geishas entertained in the restaurants and houseboats along the river.” (Tokyo: A Cultural Guide to Japan’s Capital City)

This print comes from a series by Hiroshige: Collection of Famous Restaurants in Edo. (Mia)

Woodblock printing in Japan (木版画, mokuhanga) is a technique best known for its use in the ukiyo-e artistic genre of single sheets, but it was also used for printing books in the same period. Woodblock printing had been used in China for centuries to print books, long before the advent of movable type, but was widely adopted in Japan during the Edo period (1603–1868). Although similar to woodcut in Western printmaking in some regards, the mokuhanga technique differs in that it uses water-based inks—as opposed to western woodcut, which often uses oil-based inks. The Japanese water-based inks provide a wide range of vivid colors, glazes, and transparency. (Wikipedia)

Asian Art Museum, SF: The process, from commissioning to printing the blocks:

1. A publisher commissioned an artist to create the design. The artist drew his composition in black ink on a thin sheet of paper. Although the artist might include notes and directions on his drawing, he was not involved in the printing process.
2. The artist’s drawing was then sent to the printer’s workshop, where it was pasted face down on a block of smooth cherrywood. Oil was sometimes applied to the paper to make the outlines more visible. The paper was then pulled away (Japanese paper was very strong and fibrous) to leave a thin layer behind with the design outlines showing through.
3. The engraver then cut away all the wood around the lines, a task requiring great skill. The beauty and refinement of Japanese woodblock prints was dependent on his fine touch. After the block face had been carved, printers removed the residue of paper and carefully brushed black sumi ink onto the raised lines of the block. They placed the damp paper to be printed on the block, and rubbed it rigorously with a baren, a tool made of twisted cord covered with a bamboo sheath. This rubbing motion forced the paper into hard contact with the inked lines of the wood block. These line proofs were given to the government censor for approval and to the artist for coloring. Using the artist’s hand-colored proof, the engraver would cut more blocks, one for each color and each with registration marks (kento) to assure that the lines and colors would be in proper alignment on each pass.
4. Now everything was ready for the final printing and distribution. Several printers would ink and press the paper onto each of the blocks. Colors were printed one at a time; a minimum of about ten impressions were necessary to print an average nishiki-e. With each impression, printers had to align the paper into the registration marks in the block, so that colors with each successive pass would fall in the proper location.

Paper came in three typical sizes: chuban (literally “medium block” measuring about 10.5 x 7.5 in), aiban (“medium-large block” measuring about 13 x 9 in), and oban (“large block” measuring 10.5 x 15.5 in). Oban was the standard size used for ukiyo-e. (Asian Art Museum)

About 200 prints (the usual edition of any particular design) could be made in one day. Sometimes, blocks kept in storage would be reprinted, but as the wood wore down, the line quality gradually

deteriorated. However, as many as 8,000 prints could be made from a block before cutting a new one.” (Asian Art Museum)

The soft, water-soluble colors, which were until the late nineteenth century derived from plant and mineral sources, were applied in relatively large flat areas bordered by the fine line drawing of the design. Even when artists borrowed shading techniques from the West, the woodblock process still created an essentially flat image, one of the special characteristics of Japanese prints. (Asian Art Museum)

Key Points (Context: use, history, cultural information, artist bio, etc.)

“During the Edo Period (1615-1868), a uniquely Japanese art form developed known as ukiyo-e, or “pictures of the floating world.” A Buddhist concept, ukiyo originally suggested the sadness (uki) of life (yo). But during the peace and prosperity of the 17th century, another ideograph, also pronounced uki but meaning “to float,” emerged. Instead of connoting sadness, ukiyo came to be associated with the momentary, worldly pleasures of Japan’s rising middle class. Unable to alter their social standing and regulated in nearly every aspect of their lives, from behavior and dress to the sizes of their houses, wealthy commoners found escape in licensed pleasure quarters and Kabuki theaters. There, they could watch handsome actors performing the latest plays or spend time with beautiful courtesans known for their sparkling wit, musical accomplishments, and poetry.” (artsimia.org, The Art of Asia)

Artist bio, from Asian Art Museum: “Utagawa (Ando) Hiroshige was born in 1797 in Edo. His father was the warden of the Edo fire brigade that serviced the shogun. In 1809 at the age of thirteen, Hiroshige lost both parents and inherited his father’s position. In 1810 or 1811, he sought in vain to learn ukiyo-e under the most powerful master of Kabuki actor portraits, Utagawa Toyokuni (1769–1825). Toyokuni, having more students than he could handle, turned Hiroshige over to his friend Utagawa Toyohiro (1773–1829).

Toyohiro’s interest in landscape prints, a minor genre at the time, influenced his young apprentice. For some years, Hiroshige worked on book illustrations, designs, and inexpensive prints. In 1822, at age twenty-seven, Hiroshige retired from his position as a fire warden and became a full-time artist. It is difficult to explain why Hiroshige, with his samurai status (albeit one of low rank), wanted to become an ukiyo-e artist. The financial state of the lower-ranking samurai had become increasingly difficult, and scholars have surmised that when young Hiroshige started training with Toyohiro, he might have wished to earn extra income for his household.

Hiroshige’s first landscapes were ten prints of *Famous Places in the Eastern Capital*, published in 1825. Here, he boldly adopted Western conventions to create a new hybrid style. His work at this time already revealed his particular interest in changes in nature due to weather, time, and the seasons.

In 1832, Hiroshige reportedly traveled the Tokaido Road to Kyoto on official business; he was accompanying an entourage of the shogun’s officials with their annual gift of horses to the emperor in Kyoto. The Japanese traditionally celebrated the first day of the eighth lunar month by exchanging gifts. The trip must have been an eye-opening experience for Hiroshige, a city person who had heard so much about the Tokaido Road. Returning to Edo, Hiroshige immediately launched on his monumental project

of publishing the *Fifty-three Stations of the Tokaido Road*. It was scarcely a year since Hokusai had published his famous *Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji*, of which Hiroshige was undoubtedly aware.

In 1835, Hiroshige was involved in publishing the *Sixty-nine Stations of the Kiso Road*, comprising seventy prints. The project began as a collaboration with another artist Eisai Eisen (1791–1848), but Hiroshige took over the project, designing forty-six prints in all. The Kiso Road was an alternative highway connecting Edo to Kyoto through mountainous regions and was thus difficult to travel, especially in winter. Hiroshige's evocative style portrayed a true sense of nature and the people living in perfect harmony.

In 1856, Hiroshige began his largest series, *One Hundred Views of Edo*. For a native resident, the theme of Edo was always in Hiroshige's mind. In the vertical format of the standard oban size, Hiroshige revealed his mature style in depictions of famous places in the gigantic metropolis that fascinated all people. In 1858, Hiroshige died suddenly at the age of sixty-two, a victim of the cholera epidemic that plagued Edo and claimed 28,000 lives." (end of bio)

Info on the art of the Edo Period: "By the end of the seventeenth century, three distinct modes of creative expression flourished. The renaissance of Heian culture accomplished by aristocrats and cultivated Kyoto townsmen was perpetuated in the painting and crafts of the school that later came to be called Rinpa. In urban Edo, which assumed a distinctive character with its revival after a devastating fire in 1657, a witty, irreverent expression surfaced in the literary and visual arts, giving rise to the kabuki theater and the well-known woodblock prints of the "floating world or ukiyo-e. In the eighteenth century, a Japanese response to the few threads of Chinese literati culture, introduced by Ming Chinese monks at Manpuku-ji south of Kyoto, resulted in a new style known as bunjin-ga ("literati painting"), or nanga ("painting of the southern school") after the Ming term for literati painting. Throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, these various styles were embraced by Japanese artists and artisans as distinct but nonexclusive and complementary modes of expression." (Met Museum, Art of the Edo Period)

And "The Edo period was a time of relative peace administered by a conservative military government. In order to encourage stability, and influenced by a revived interest in Confucian mores, the Tokugawa regime segregated society into four classes: warriors, farmers, artisans, and—at the bottom of the heap—merchants. Seeking to control public behavior, the Tokugawa shogunate set aside walled areas in all major cities for the establishment of brothels, teahouses, and theaters. In these districts all classes comingled, and money and style dominated.

Edo-period cities contained newly rich townspeople, mostly merchants and artisans known as chonin, who gained economic strength by taking advantage of the dramatic expansion of the cities and commerce. Eventually, they found themselves in a paradoxical position of being economically powerful but socially confined. As a result, they turned their attention, and their assets, to conspicuous consumption and the pursuit of pleasure in the entertainment districts.... This hedonistic culture that glorified life in the "floating world" was particularly well expressed in the production of woodblock prints, which made available to anyone with a bit of extra cash captivating images of seductive courtesans, exciting kabuki actors, and famous romantic vistas. For the first time, artists were inspired by and responded to the interests and preferences of the general public." (Met museum, Art of the Pleasure Quarters)

Current Mia Label Information (optional)

No label

Sources of Information and/or Prop Ideas (photos/videos)

Ukiyo-e prints, The Art of Asia, online resource: <http://archive.artsmia.org/art-of-asia/explore/explore-collection-ukiyo-e.cfm>

Art of the Pleasure Quarters and the Ukiyo-e Style, Met Museum: http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/plea/hd_plea.htm

Art of the Edo Period (1615–1868), Met Museum: http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/edop/hd_edop.htm

Woodblock printing in Japan: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Woodblock_printing_in_Japan

The Ukiyo-e (Woodblock) Printing Process, Asian Art Museum: <http://education.asianart.org/explore-resources/background-information/ukiyo-e-woodblock-printing-process>

Utagawa Hiroshige, artist profile, Asian Art Museum: <http://education.asianart.org/explore-resources/background-information/artist-profile-utagawa-ando-hiroshige-1797%E2%80%931858>

John H. and Phyllis G. Martin, Tokyo: A Cultural Guide to Japan's Capital City, 1996.