



# JAPANESE PRINTS

## Images from the floating world

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## EDUCATION PACK

### Introduction

This exhibition traces the development of the *ukiyo-e* (floating world picture) print movement in Edo (now Tokyo) from the 1750's through the themes of beautiful women, *kabuki* actors, landscapes, surimono, and history and legend.

The *ukiyo-e* print movement reflected the spirit and philosophy of Edo's new urban culture during the Tokugawa period (1603-1868). During this period, *ukiyo* (fleeting, floating world) was understood as a celebration of the present, valuing above all, pleasure and beauty, because they belonged only to the passing moment. *Ukiyo* was a means of living more fully and more deeply by embracing the joy, beauty and poignancy of life. It was a world of popular entertainment, fantasy and sexual desire, in which actors and courtesans were the leading characters. In Edo (now Tokyo) *ukiyo* gave rise to a popular culture that was centred in the *kabuki* theatre district and Yoshiwara pleasure quarter. Here, money could buy momentary pleasures and transform the nature of reality under an oppressive government.

Beautiful women, cherry blossom, maple leaves in autumn, softly falling snow and spring rain were the most celebrated symbols of the impermanence of beauty and the transient joy of life. It was these subjects and sensibilities which engendered the development of *ukiyo-e* prints in Edo.

Twentieth century prints by artists influenced by the *ukiyo-e* movement are also displayed. The majority of these are from the shin-hanga (new print) movement (c.1915-35). Shin-hanga artists revived the style, technique and subject of *ukiyo-e* prints within the context of a modern Japan.

These notes incorporate texts and research from the *Japanese Prints, Images of the Floating World* catalogue, written by the exhibition's Curator, Jane Messenger, Associate Curator Prints, Drawings and Photographs, Art Gallery of South Australia. Education Services also acknowledges: technical research and texts provided by Anne Keast and cultural studies advice provided by Jennifer Harris.

## Historical background

*...living only for the moment, turning our full attention to the pleasures of the moon, the snow, the cherry blossoms and the maple leaves; singing songs, drinking wine, diverting ourselves in just floating, floating; caring not a whit for the pauperism staring us in the face, refusing to be disheartened, like a gourd floating along the river current: this is what we call the floating world...* *Tales of the floating world*, Asai Ryoi, 1661

During the Tokugawa period translated as this 'fleeting, floating world', became the catalyst for a dramatic cultural transformation in Japan. It engendered the dynamic *ukiyo-e* woodblock (1603–1868) a new understanding of the ancient notion of *ukiyo*, print movement (the suffix -e means 'picture'), which has since been regarded as one of the most influential print movements in the history of art. The *ukiyo-e* prints reflected the image of the new urban society as it developed in Edo (now Tokyo) and encapsulated the poetic optimism of the period. The Buddhist term *ukiyo* originally referred to the transient world of sorrow from which sentient beings sought release. However, during the Tokugawa period, a time of unprecedented civil peace and far-reaching social change, the idea of *ukiyo* transformed into a celebration of the present, valuing above all the pleasure and beauty that belonged to each passing moment.

When Ieyasu Tokugawa became shogun (military dictator) in 1603, he transferred the seat of Japan's political power from the imperial court in Kyoto to Edo, and this small fishing village was transformed into a vibrant metropolis. By 1740, Edo was one of the largest cities in the world with a population of over one million. The principal beneficiaries of this exponential urban growth were the townsmen (*chônin*) who rose from the poorer ranks of society to emerge as Japan's first wealthy middle class. *Ukiyo* was used to describe the lifestyle and values of this new, merchant class. Their increased prosperity stimulated the development of a popular consumer culture in which the *ukiyo-e* print movement became an articulate voice.

People within society were divided into four hierarchical estates according to how their specific role was perceived within the wider social framework. The samurai, the farmer and the artisan were placed above the merchant, who merely worked for profit and did not contribute to the greater good. Even while the merchants were prospering commercially and becoming a rich middle class, the rigid hierarchical system ensured they were without social mobility or a political voice.

*Ukiyo* became synonymous with the pleasures of popular entertainment and in particular the leisure industry of the *kabuki* theatre and the Yoshiwara pleasure quarters. In these realms, the townsmen experienced a carefree lifestyle which promised pleasure, beauty and sexual desire. This cultural phenomenon was not simply a result of the townspeople's increased purchasing power. It developed as a means of escape from the rigid social order imposed by the Tokugawa shogunate, which promoted civil unity through an ideology of collective identity. <sup>1</sup>

1 – selected from catalogue essay, *Images of the Floating World*, Jane Messenger, Assoc Curator Prints, Drawing, Photographs – AGSA, 2004

## EXHIBITION THEMES

### Beautiful Women (Bijin-Ga) and the Yoshiwara

The beautiful women prints (*bijin-ga*) reflect a glamorous view of the Yoshiwara pleasure quarter. The prints allude to the daily rituals of a courtesan's public and private life, and depict the atmosphere of a carefree lifestyle associated with the Yoshiwara 'floating world'.

The cherry blossoms, maple leaves, falling snow and bursting fireworks in the prints suggest the transience of beauty that was the poignant reality of a courtesan's life. Courtesans enjoyed freedoms and luxuries denied to other women in society. However a courtesan's status and lifestyle depended on her beauty that faded as youth passed into old age.

The prints of beautiful women were extremely popular during 1660 to 1860 and made up to 40 per cent of all *Ukiyo-e* prints produced in that period. The courtesan of the Yoshiwara was one of the most popular subjects and great emphasis was placed on the depiction of face, hair and kimono.

There are a few clues given to the age of the women in the prints such as older women are shown without eyebrows and the v-shaped marks over the nose to indicate wrinkles.

Womens' kimonos also varied in style from the mid 1800's - the *Obi* which tied around the kimono was worn with a bow in front by the courtesans, all other women tied them at the back.

Some of the *ukiyo-e* artists even set new trends in fashion design by the styles of Kimono depicted in their prints. Children were also used as subjects for prints in association with women or by themselves playing some activity or game. The girls' doll festival and the boys festival were two popular topics.

A common series of *Ukiyo-e* prints was representation of women from the four different classes in Japanese society of samurai, farmer, artisan and merchant. Women acting out the role of a famous poet or character from classical themes or romantic stories were well known to the common people and very popular topics.

Commonly known symbols were used by artists in the prints – so that when a young couple were depicted carrying an umbrella it suggests that they were living together with their parents knowledge.

Not only were the young girls of the town and the ladies of the brothels portrayed but also the waitresses of the tea houses and the geisha.

The geisha are recognised by the *Obi* being tied behind their backs and having white lead-based powder on their faces; often they are accompanied by a man-servant and maids.

## Kabuki actors

Actor prints are amongst the earliest subjects in *ukiyo-e*. They were produced as advertisements and souvenirs for the contemporary theatre known as *kabuki*, and promoted the celebrity status of the actors. The *kabuki* tradition evolved from dance and pantomime during the seventeenth century. Male actors played both sexes and conveyed its melodramatic stories with exaggerated gestures and bombastic poses.

## The Theatre

The *Kabuki* theatre was an important source of subject matter for the *ukiyo-e* artists. From the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, the excitement and epic stories of the theatre were extremely popular with the merchant class and common people. *Ukiyo-e* prints of the bust portrait of individual actors in character for some role, or groups of actors in a scene from a play were popular with theatre-goers.

The bust portraits would often show the actor in a special pose (*mie*) with an angry expression on his face, his eyes crossed emphasising a moment of great emotional tension in the play. Plays could be divided into two groups, one of classical plays based on historical events and the other plays of common folk acting out themes and events from everyday life. Classical stories of revenge such as the *Chushingura* were extremely popular. The make-up and dress of the actors helped to identify the characters – facial colours gave a clue to the nature of the man, such as red showed a loyal man yet striped red marking on the face meant an aggressive man. The actor's professional name was usually included on the print and he was also recognised by the *Mon* or badge worn on his costume.

## Landscape

A new genre of landscape images enriched the *ukiyo-e* tradition in the nineteenth century. The publication of guidebooks and travel pictures from the 1800s was an innovation that greatly contributed to this development. Depictions of journeys along the main road from Edo (Tokyo) to Kyoto, known as the Tokaido trail, were among the most popular. Hiroshige's *Fifty-three stations of the Tokaido* (c.1843-44) was an immediate commercial success and established Hiroshige's reputation as a leading artist.

Hiroshige's prints embody a long tradition in Japan looking to nature for artistic inspiration. His landscapes convey the poetic sentiments of the 'floating world' philosophy through depicting the beauty of the passing seasons. Images such as blossoms, spring rain and fallen snow imply the transience of existence and its cycles.

## Landscape Prints

The first landscape prints were simple topographical images seen in pictorial maps of the travel routes of Japan. In 1640 the *Meishoo-Ki* or guidebooks produced for Japanese pilgrims, travellers and sightseers also used illustrations of landscapes.

As travel restrictions were lifted under Tokagawa's rule, so the Japanese began to travel in greater numbers. Pilgrims clubs under the club president (Sendatsu) used the guidebooks to travel along well-loved routes during July to mid September, visiting important religious and historical sites. In the 1780s Shiba Kokan under the influence of western ideas introduced the use of 'atmospheric effects' in landscape prints.

Two Japanese *Ukiyo-e* masters who excelled in the production of these atmospheric qualities in prints were Hiroshige and Hokusai.

One of the most popular landscape themes was the Tokaido Road – the mainly coastal highway between Edo and Kyoto – the subject of the prints were the 53 stations situated along its length. Another popular set produced by Hokusai was the 36 Views of Fuji (it actually consists of 46 plates).

The production of the Eight Views (Hakkei) could be adopted to any location by any of the landscape artists for the actual subjects were always the same – snow, evening rain, autumn moon, the evening bell, boats returning at evening, geese flying to rest, sunset, and clearing weather after rain.

Other subjects such as rivers, waterfalls, and bridges were popular with both artists and travellers.

## Surimono Prints

Wealthy patrons and amateur poetry groups commissioned *surimono*, literally meaning a 'printed thing', for private distribution. *Surimono* commemorated special events and festivals, such as New Year, or honoured the best writing from poetry groups popular in Japan at that time.

*Surimono* were produced with greater extravagance than other woodblock prints intended for commercial distribution. They were made using the finest inks, powered precious metals and embossed paper. These prints were conceived as objects of value and have been frequently preserved in collectors' albums.

## History and Legend

Nineteenth century print artists explored the vast literature of history and legend to reinvigorate the *ukiyo-e* movement. The popularity of this new genre reflected a growing public demand for the fantastic and bizarre. Audiences in this time of civil peace unprecedented in Japanese history re-lived these tales of epic battles and heroic self-sacrifice through the *ukiyo-e* medium. A favourite subject was the bravery and defiant fury of the hero in the face of certain death.

These historical prints interpreted the earlier theme of *ukiyo-e* where artists captured fleeting moments in contemporary life. The historical print depicted stories of the famous *samurai* and women whose lives were given, and often lost, in a defining moment. Pain, anger and grief were embodied in these prints of history and legend as emotions through which the viewer could more fully experience the rich diversity of human life.

## **Ukiyo-e woodblock prints – a brief history**

The art of woodblock printing arrived in Japan via Buddhist literature from China.

Woodblock printing was the most popular method of producing pictures for books on religious topics.

With the growth of the merchant classes in Japan in the Edo Period (1603-1867), popular literature began to be produced in larger quantities to cater for the tastes of the merchants and their families.

They preferred to read picture storybooks based on popular stories and plays and the woodblock print provided the illustrations for these books.

### **The production of *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints**

The production of *ukiyo-e* prints was a commercial enterprise. It was a collaborative effort involving publisher, artist, block cutter and printer. The publisher financed the project and thus retained authorship of the design and woodblocks.

The publisher commissioned a new design from the artist. The block cutter then reversed this design onto a woodblock. The areas apart from the outline were cut away to create a key block, from which proofs were printed for the artist to indicate colour. Each colour required a separate block, which was then inked and hand printed. The key block was printed last, with the black outline unifying the individual areas of colour.

The contrast apparent today between the soft tones of the eighteenth century prints and the bolder vibrant colours of the following century signals the introduction of synthetic colours by the Dutch traders around the 1820s. The previously used organic and mineral dyes faded rapidly and often altered quite dramatically - blue turned to light tan for example.

### **The emergence of the *ukiyo-e* print**

1632- The first recorded form of a single sheet woodblock print - not attached to a book was produced by Moronobu Kishikawa. This first print was only black and white.

1700- artist began to add colours with a brush at first - red, was the main colour, then light green and yellow, light blue and crimson were introduced.

1745- colour was added by the printing of blocks of colour instead of applying the colour with a brush.

1765- Habunobu Suzuki produced a calendar by the printing process with fine linework and a large range of colours. It was called a brocade print.

Further development occurred (post 1765) with such techniques as embossing, indentation, metallic dusts used in colours and colour graduation.

## The process of making a *ukiyo-e* print

The production of the *ukiyo-e* print was a collaborative effort involving the publisher, artist, carver and printer.

Each person performed a particular role.

### **First stage**

**The Publisher:** commissioned artists to produce design for prints.

**The Artist:** produced a line drawing to paste onto the woodblock.

**The Carver:** cut away the woodblock leaving only the line drawing raised on its surface.

### **Second stage**

**The Artist:** printed this initial outline woodblock to make as many prints as there were to be colours in the final print. On each print the artist indicated the area to be coloured with red ink.

**The Carver:** Cut each woodblock for each colour as indicated by the artist.

**The Printer and the Artist:** worked together to produce sample prints, so they could decide on the final colours.

**The Printer:** then printed multiples of the multi-coloured print for distribution.

**The Publisher:** was responsible for distribution of the printer usually through publishing houses, but there were also retail print shops where the *Ukiyo-e* prints could be purchased.

## The Publisher

The first publishing houses started in Nagasaki, but flourished in the new city of Edo (Tokyo) where the production of the single printed sheet reached its peak.

The publisher was often also the retailer of the prints, selling the prints through print shops which they owned.

Commissions for prints were very common in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century and the publisher was often approached by clubs of amateur art lovers to select an artist to produce a drawing for a woodblock print, so each club member could have their own copy.

At the height of their popularity, prints were produced in large numbers for the general public to purchase.

## The Engravers or Carvers

Families of carvers were contracted to a publisher, often living in the house of the publisher, sometimes the carver and the publisher were the same person.

The engraver sometimes had the opportunity to change the designs on the blocks, because once the engraver had the designs for the blocks he very rarely saw the artist again.

To train as an engraver of woodblocks, it took 10 years to develop the required skills, whereas it took three years to become a printer and four years to become an artist.

The mountain cherry tree cut along the grain provided the best wood for traditional woodblock prints.

The blades of the cutting knives and chisels were constructed in the same manner as samurai swords to achieve high quality sharpness and strength.

The knife (*To*) was used for cutting lines while the chisels were used to clear away larger areas of the blocks.

The block could be worked upon by a number of carvers of varying experience, the apprentices clearing away large areas while the head cutter concentrated on the finer details of face, hair and hands.

## The Printer

The printer usually worked in the publisher's workshop – so his work could be watched and supervised by the publisher.

Sometimes the printers became publishers and performed both roles in the production of a print.

Brushes made of horsehair were used to apply the ink to the blocks.

Using brushes of varying widths allowed printers to create graduation of tone in one colour area.

Each colour of each print was hand rubbed as no printing presses were used.

The baren, a round pad made from paper and bamboo, was used skilfully by the printer to create his prints.

The paper was always moistened prior to printing and kept in stacks to maintain consistent dampness.

Japanese paper, such as *nosho* is soft and fluffy yet strong and made from the bark of the mulberry tree.

When printed the colour pigments of the dyes soaked into the paper.

The surface of the paper was sized with animal glue before printing to reduce absorbency

## Types of prints

<b>Tan-E print</b>	Hand coloured print using firstly red pigment (tan), then later other colours were added such as light green and yellow.
<b>Beni-prints</b>	Hand coloured with soft pinkish red paint
<b>Urushi-e</b>	1720 - Lacquer prints – black pigments mixed with glue that, on drying, took on a high varnish like gloss
<b>Benizuri-e prints</b>	Orange vermillion colour (Beni) was printed onto the prints
<b>Ichimai-e</b>	Single sheet prints printed in black outline from a key block
<b>Oju or Ojite</b>	Commissioned prints to order
<b>Monotome ni ozu</b>	Commissioned prints by special order
<b>Azuma</b>	Harunobus brocade prints
<b>Nishiki-e</b>	Brocade prints from eastern provinces (mainly Edo)
<b>Hanshita</b>	Carefully constructed design for key block
<b>Sumiban</b>	Relief cut key block
<b>Kyogo</b>	Printed images of key block

## Carving Tools

Kogatana	Knives
Kamazarai	Gouges
Nomi	Chisels
Kushigi	Saws
Saizuchi	Mallet

## Printing Colours

Tan	Orange red	made from red lead
Ao	Blue	made from indigo (airo)
Hero	Ultramarine	imported from Europe
Ki or Kiwo	Yellow	made from the bark of the different trees
Murasaki	Purple	made by mixing blue and beni
Midori	Green	A mixture of hero and kiwo
To-o	Orange yellow	A mixture of benigara and yellow dye
Benigara	Iron red	Derived from the treatment of iron pyrites
Sumi	Black	Pine soot (susu) mixed with glue Lampblack (yu-yen) made by burning oil made from spruce nuts
Tsuya-zumi	Brilliant Black	Mixing lampblack with a medium made from glue and alum - used in printing areas such as hair or black garments, etc.

## Planning a visit to the exhibition

**Group size:** One class size group at time.

**Duration:** Groups will need a minimum of 30 minutes to an hour in the exhibition (depending on levels of requirements).

If more than one group would like to access the exhibition it is possible for another class size group to view other Japanese and Asian works on display in the gallery's Asian Galleries. This would mean for example, 2 groups rotating through both the Japanese Prints exhibition and selected Japanese works in the permanent display within a 1 hour time frame. (ie 30 minutes in each area).

Alternatively a group could plan to both view and work in the Japanese Prints exhibition for an extended time and then spend time in the Asian Galleries. This may be an option for senior students engaged in extended research.

### Guided Sessions

A limited number of guided sessions provided by the Education Officer or Education Guides are available. These are introductory sessions are around 25-30 minute duration (*leaving time for students to work with teachers and or individual/small group viewing*). In the guided sessions students will be taken through a 'learning to look' process using selected works. Reference will be made to aspects of technical production as well as the styles of different artists and periods. The content (eg historical detail or folk stories) of particular works will also be introduced. This focus does not include extended historical or cultural frameworks.

Where a guided session is not possible or not required, sections of this Education Pack can be adapted to support a self-guided session.

Please advise whether you require guided support for your visit when making a booking.

### Bookings & exhibition entry

- An entry fee (schools concession) applies to this exhibition. \$20 per class size group. Supervising teachers/adults free admission.
- **DECS Classified 1-4, AISS listed disadvantaged schools and all country schools free admission.**

**All group bookings: TEL: 82077033, FAX 82077070**

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