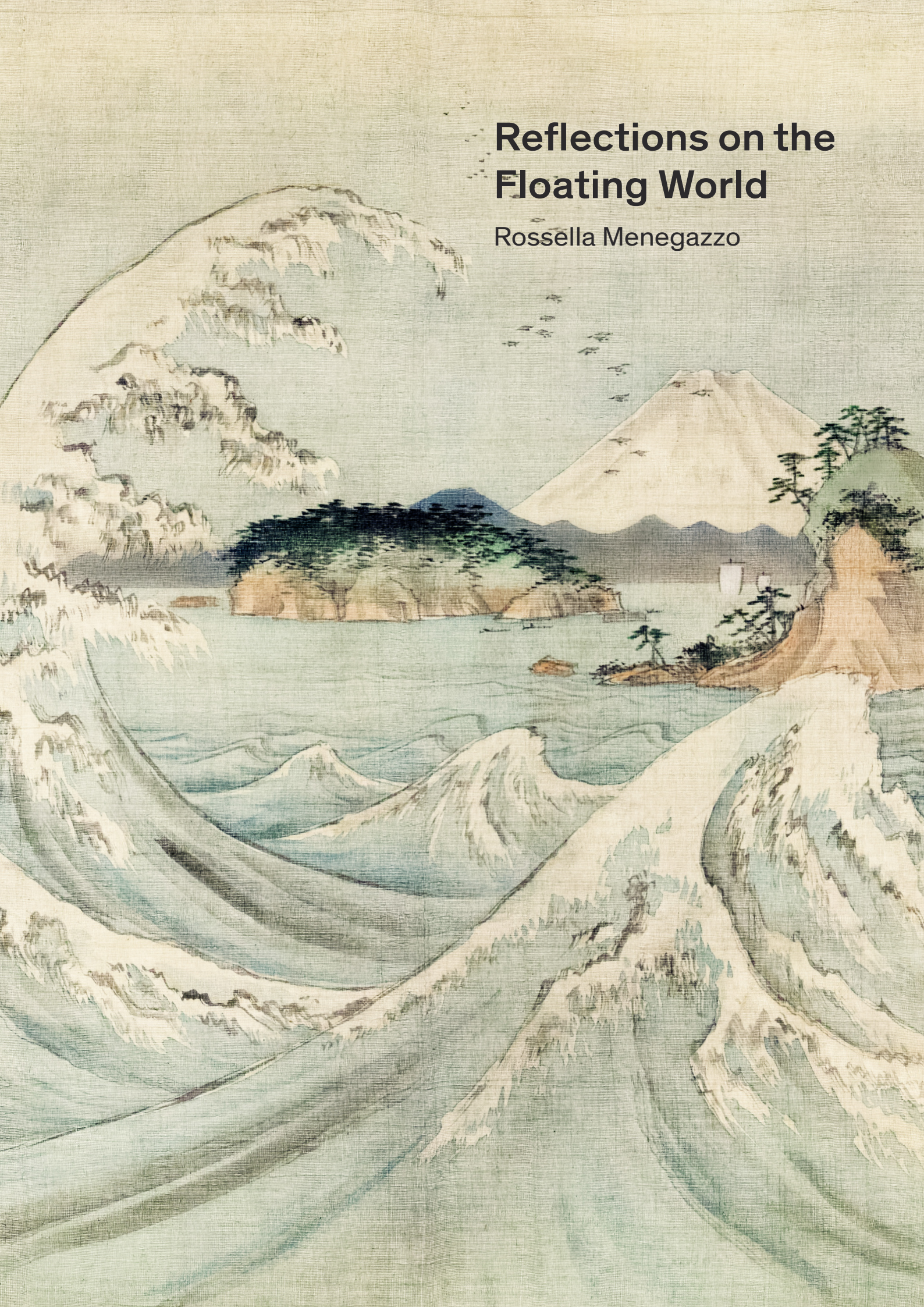
Reflections on the Floating World

Rossella Menegazzo



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This text is the print version of a lecture presented by Dr Rossella Menegazzo at Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki as part of the opening events for the exhibition *Enchanted Worlds: Hokusai, Hiroshige and the Art of Edo Japan*.

Cover

Utagawa Hiroshige *Great Waves of Sōshū Shichiriga-hama* 1847, hanging scroll, ink and colour on silk. Private collection.

AUCKLAND ART GALLERY TOI O TĀMAKI

Reflections on the Floating World

Rossella Menegazzo

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Figure 1
Kawahara Keiga *Bustling Scene of City Life*
circa 1825, framed painting, ink and colour on silk
Private collection.


呉服物類
定日請合
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Introduction

The Japanese art exhibition *Enchanted Worlds: Hokusai, Hiroshige and the Art of Edo Japan* consists of 70 artworks – paintings in ink and colours on silk or paper in the form of hanging scrolls (*kakemono*) and on screens (*byōbu*). There is also a selection of woodblock prints (*hanga*) from the collection of Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, but the main corpus of *Enchanted Worlds* is painting. Even in Japan, there are few occasions to see so many works of such quality together. Images of the Floating World or *ukiyo-e* are generally shown through *nishiki-e* (woodblock prints). While *nishiki-e* were produced in popular series from the Edo period (1603–1868), I think that the real expression of the mastery of the many artists presented in *Enchanted Worlds* can best be seen in their paintings (*nikuhitsu*). In fact, it is only fairly recently that Japan has begun dedicating entire exhibitions exclusively to paintings of *ukiyo-e* masters.

All the hanging scrolls and folding screens exhibited in this exhibition are directly depicted by the masters using different brushes with ink and colours on silk and paper backgrounds. In the case of a woodblock print, however, we have a work made by an *equipe* or team. In this scenario the original black outline sketch is designed by the brush of the master, who could be Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849), Utagawa Hiroshige (1797–1858), Kitagawa Utamaro (circa 1753–1806), or someone else, but the final work is also the result of the skill of the engraver, who carved the woodblocks, of the printer, who managed the application of colours on the blocks to obtain the colour print, and of the publisher, who sponsored the publication of a particular series of prints and supplied it to the market. That said, I think *Enchanted Worlds*, with its combination of painting and woodblock prints, offers a unique occasion to see all these masters together, starting from the painting of the mid-17th century and going through to the end of the 19th century, which is a span of about 250 years – in other words the *entire* Edo period. This era was a fascinating period of Japanese history and it was also one that exerted a great influence on our Western and international art history.

When we speak about 'Japonism', or the popularity and influence of Japanese art, we cannot avoid discussing *ukiyo-e* works, which represented the first and strongest source European and Western artists used to change their vision, to transform their styles and to find new artistic forms. On the other hand, it also needs to be said that while Japan was opening itself up after hundreds of years of closure to foreign commerce, first in a controlled way during the earlier Tokugawa period (1603–1868) and then more liberally in the mid-19th century, Japan itself underwent a total transformation, introducing many new technologies and devices, as well as new artistic techniques from Europe – especially through Dutch merchants. This is very interesting because we so often refer to Japan as a closed country during the Edo period – we use the word *sakoku* ('closed country') – but as can be seen from the evolution of *ukiyo-e* works, the reality was more complex.

This is especially true in the case of the eighth *shōgun* Tokugawa Yoshimune (1684–1751), the samurai who had the political and administrative power over the whole country from 1716 to 1745. Yoshimune was an open-minded governor, who was fond of culture

and under whose rule there was an increase in the importation of manuals, prints, etchings and products from Europe. So we cannot say that Japan was 'completely closed'. It depended on the periods and on who was in power. While it is true that the Tokugawa family ruled from 1603 as the shogunate family, it is necessary to remember that in the period of 250 years *several shōgun* – several individual minds – governed Japan for such a long time and determined the opening or closing of relations with foreign countries. We see all of this reflected in *ukiyo-e*, because it is the art related to the new social classes which developed during the Edo period. We can see, for example, in this detail of a late 19th-century depiction of a city which could be Osaka (a major commercial hub with a thriving merchant class) how many social classes and works are portrayed (fig 1).

This particular interest in city life and human activities is typical of *ukiyo-e* paintings and it reflects a significant shift in the artistic taste of Japanese society, which had until the Edo period been dominated by the preferences of the samurai class. From the 17th century, however, following the creation of Edo as the 'Eastern capital' and administrative centre (as distinct from Kyoto, which remained the Imperial capital), a new social tier emerged. This was the merchant class or the *chōnin* – the townsmen and women of the metropolis. An interest in urban life was also a consequence of an unprecedented and extended period of peace, which allowed people who lived in the cities to develop a variety of activities. These included commerce – primarily selling and buying products – but also new entertainment and hospitality services linked to the enjoyment of everyday life which for the first time became possible after hundreds of years of conflict within Japan. This peace had further social consequences. The samurai, who continued to be at the top of the social hierarchy, became increasingly poor, having lost their battle fields, and became heavily indebted to the new merchants in order to preserve their status. The most elite class of samurai, the *daimyō* (provincial warlords who were subordinate only to the *shōgun*) in particular used a lot of money to maintain castles, residences and servants.

Right

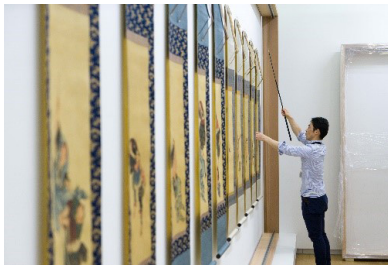
Figure 2
Map of Edo-period Japan

Hanging Scrolls

Returning to the exhibition, I will briefly discuss the hanging scroll format. In these photographs, taken during installation, you can see the process of unrolling and fixing a beautiful set of 11 works by Hokusai to the wall (figs 3–5). The Japanese word for a hanging scroll is *kakemono*, meaning 'a thing to be hanged'. Each scroll has its own specific structure, with the painted image on paper or silk framed by a textile edging, which can be replaced over time according to the taste and preference of owners. This provisional aspect of the fabric surround is the reason why we rarely reproduce paintings with their borders in publications; they are of secondary importance to the Japanese, even if many of us appreciate them for their unique textures and forms.

We should also bear in mind that many of the works we see today in the format of hanging scrolls were once screen paintings, which over the centuries have been removed from their original settings on panels and re-mounted on scrolls: for example, the 11 scrolls by Hokusai were originally mounted on two six-panel folding screens, but were later cut out and re-mounted in their present hanging scroll formats. Sometimes this was done because of the difficulty of conserving the separate images in multi-panelled screens, and sometimes because of structural damage to the screen themselves. However, a great number of paintings were also separated from the screens and sold individually after the end of the Edo period. At that time the elimination of the samurai class and their privileges obliged them to sell their possessions, just as international demand for Japanese art was growing as a result of the International Expositions. In recent times some of the items that went to Europe and America have been returned to Japan and to Japanese museums, thanks to the efforts of private galleries and collectors, who have been gradually repatriating significant works of historical art that were dispersed overseas in the Meiji (1868–1912) and later periods.

The fragile format of the hanging scroll in itself is a clue that these works were never thought of as artworks to be shown permanently on the wall in the manner of European framed pictures, to be displayed year in and year out in homes and galleries. On the contrary, they were (and continue to be) works intended for temporary display, to be carefully chosen for their subjects' relationship to the season, to the period of the year, such as New Year's Eve, or to a particular occasion, such as a tea ceremony. Another factor in determining their selection was the guest or guests that you wanted to welcome and show to your home. Scroll paintings were, and still are, mainly shown in the small alcove that is a feature of the traditional Japanese house, known as the *tokonoma*. This *tokonoma*, which occupies a modest space in one room, with the floor slightly higher than the rest of the room, in fact creates the whole atmosphere of the house, making it the most important part of the house – the core of the house. The painting you display inside is comparable to a dress: you decide which painting to show, and to whom to show it as an auspicious portent, depending on the occasion, on the opportunity and on the time of the season. In this respect its use is much more personal and intimate than a work of art in the Western artistic tradition, and the way in which it is regarded is also fundamentally different.



Above

Figures 3-5
Installation of hanging scrolls, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, March 2020. Images courtesy of Yuki Seli.

Above

Figure 6
Edo, The Eastern Capital 1705 (Hōei era), woodblock print with addition of hand-colour, Edo-Tokyo Museum.

This hand-coloured map, printed with the woodblock technique, shows us the city of Edo and its layout as a centre of power in the early 18th century (fig 6). The coastal fishing village of Edo was chosen a hundred years prior, in 1603, as the capital by the first *shōgun*, Ieyasu Tokugawa (1543–1616), who also constructed the castle of Edo on the site where Tokyo's Imperial Palace stands today. What this map shows us is how at that time Edo was a city of water, threaded by many rivers. This fact offers another entry point in understanding much of the imagery of the period, which revolves around water-related enjoyments in boats, on bridges and along the embankments, as well as on the merchant activities along the main rivers. We can also see how the urban development of the city flowed in a circular direction, with the castle of the *shōgun* in the centre, surrounded by the several residences of the *daimyō*, who came to reside in the capital. What is also interesting to note is that the names of their palaces are written in large-scale characters compared with those of smaller residences – which is why the lords of provinces were called *daimyō*: 'big names'.

Above

Figure 7
Anonymous *Viewing Cherry Blossoms at Kiyomizu Temple* circa1640, six-panel folding screen, ink and colour on paper. Private collection.

Edo and the World of Pleasure

The exhibition opens with three painted screens, starting with one of the most important sacred places of Kyoto, the Kiyomizu-dera, or the 'Pure Water Temple', which features beautiful ladies from the nearby pleasure quarter in the foreground (fig 7). The screen brings together all the main subjects of *ukiyo-e*. Beauties (*bijin*), pleasures, the enjoyment of the four seasons (*shiki*) and the enjoyment of famous places (*meisho*) in Kyoto, presenting them like a series of postcards. You can observe the difference of scale between the upper right part of the painting, with its distinctive platform terrace of the Kiyomizu temple telling us we are in Kyoto, and the vignette of pilgrims bathing under the famous sacred springs visible to the far right (fig 8) relatively miniaturised, in contrast to the large-scaled female beauties under trees in the left foreground. That is because this screen was once part of a pair of six-panel folding screens. The absent left screen featured beauties (*bijin*) of the pleasure quarter near the Kiyomizu-dera, while the present right screen merely served as a sort of background with a famous place (*meisho*) included to fix its location within the Imperial capital.

Left

Figure 8
Anonymous *Viewing Cherry Blossoms at Kiyomizu Temple* circa 1640 (detail), six-panel folding screen, ink and colour on paper. Private collection.

The Kiyomizu-dera is one of the temples that continues to be at the centre of life in Kyoto today, attracting crowds to enjoy the cherry trees in its grounds, which blossom spectacularly in spring, and to admire the reddish maple trees in autumn from the wide terrace on the hill. At the entrance of the temple it is possible to discern some *ema*, or votive plaques with horses painted on wood (fig 9). In front of the *ema*, on the temple's famous terrace, a troupe of veiled dancers, wearing kimono of similar colours and design, sway to the music of a *shakuhachi* (bamboo flute) and a *shamisen* (stringed instrument). Some beggars and old men are present and also a pair of samurai. Soldiers by caste and tradition, samurai had to adapt themselves to more urban occupations under Tokugawa rule, turning to the arts, to teaching to bureaucratic careers as well as to the enjoyment of city life.

Right

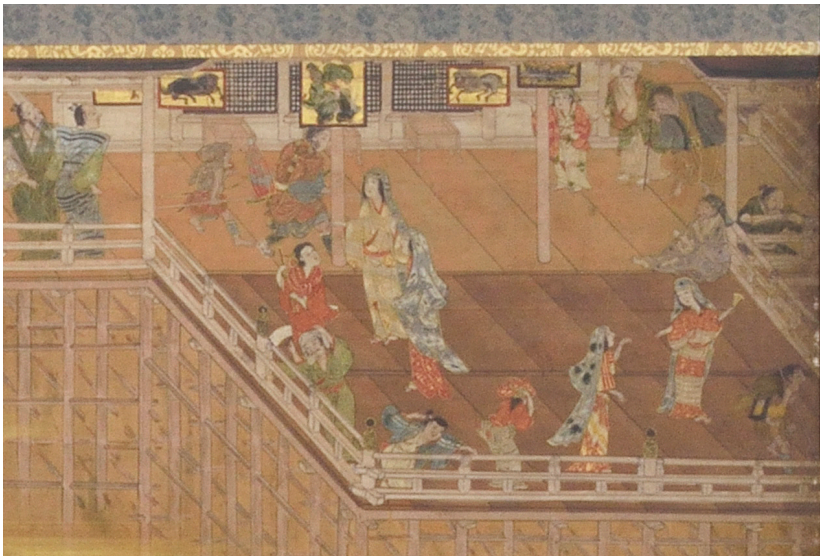


Figure 9
Anonymous, *Viewing Cherry Blossoms at Kiyomizu Temple* circa 1640 (detail), six-panel folding screen, ink and colour on paper. Private collection.

These many details demonstrate once again how the sacred and profane are repeatedly seen together as subjects and how, in *ukiyo-e* paintings, all the social classes are depicted. Such scenes exemplify the essence of *ukiyo-e*, which translates as 'images of the floating world' and means the depiction of what was fashionable and what was the city's main life of that period. The term 'Floating World' is a nebulous concept, first used in this sense in 1666 by the poet Ueda Akinari (1743–1809), in his *Ukiyo monogatari (Tales of the Floating World)*. 'Floating' related to the enjoyment of each moment of each day, to the ephemeral, transient beauty expressed through seasonal change and portraits of elegant ladies, and was at this time used for the first time in contrast to the negative meaning it had in the Buddhist teachings until that moment.

Above

Figure 10
Anonymous *Banquet with Music in Former Yoshiwara* circa 1655, six-panel folding screen, ink and colour on paper. Private collection.

The other two screens which introduce the exhibition depict the walled Yoshiwara pleasure quarter in Edo. *Banquet with Music in Former Yoshiwara*, circa 1655 shows the first establishment (Moto-Yoshiwara), which was completely destroyed by fire (the so-called Great Fire) in 1657 (fig 10). Upon entry to the Yoshiwara the law that you were subject to was not the law of the *shōgun*, but that of the beautiful ladies inside the pleasure quarter, a subversive departure from the strict Confucian hierarchy that prevailed outside. In this scene you see *oiran*, courtesans, geisha (who originally worked supporting the *oiran*), and you witness again the social mixing in the streets and spaces of the pleasure quarters, with merchants, samurai, and very poor people depicted. Thanks to the separating device of decorative gold clouds, these kinds of genre scenes can be read as divided into episodes (not unlike contemporary manga), giving you a glimpse from an elevated viewpoint of activities taking place inside the private spaces.

On the right panel (fig 11) beautiful women are entertaining groups of samurai, who are recognisable because they were the only ones who could wear two *katana*, or swords. There are small screens and sliding partitions dividing the spaces and a *tokonoma* with a hanging scroll portraying Daruma, Bodhidarma, the 6th-century founder of Zen Buddhism, one of the main religious subjects depicted and sculpted during the Edo period. Bodhidarma was a symbol of meditation and represented the path to the True World (*nirvana*) through his rejection of the transient world. His presence in this scene is therefore satirical. Courtesans and Daruma were often jokingly linked and a courtesan with a red vest was known as *onna*-Daruma or 'woman Daruma'. Beneath the scroll there is a shamisen waiting to be played by a geisha; while in the lower scenes music and dance are performed and a banquet is served in a wide room where an ink landscape scroll is hung again in the *tokonoma* (fig 12).

Left

Figure 11
Anonymous *Banquet with Music in Former Yoshiwara* circa1655 (detail), six-panel folding screen, ink and colour on paper. Private collection.

Left

Figure 12
Anonymous *Banquet with Music in Former Yoshiwara* circa1655 (detail), six-panel folding screen, ink and colour on paper. Private collection.

In one area servants are preparing fish and vegetables that will be cooked on small fires (fig 13). In the next scene we are led into the private spaces where geisha and *oiran* prepare themselves with make-up and gorgeous kimono and *obi* (fig 14).

Right

Figure 13
Anonymous *Banquet with Music in Former Yoshiwara* circa1655 (detail), six-panel folding screen, ink and colour on paper. Private collection.

Right

Figure 14
Anonymous *Banquet with Music in Former Yoshiwara* circa1655 (detail), six-panel folding screen, ink and colour on paper. Private collection.

On the upper part of the screen a lady with a child nearby is blowing the coals in a brazier (*hibachi*) to boil water for tea, which is to be served by a young girl to two guests (fig 15). In an adjacent scene another woman tends a *hibachi*, facing a wall of shelves filled with lacquered bowls and objects, minutely depicted (fig 16). Behind her sits another visiting samurai who receives tea from a lady who prepares a long pipe for him. Through the partition two samurai converse on the veranda while a servant with a skull design on his jacket crouches patiently on guard outside. The street is full of all kinds of individuals from all social classes, even beggars, intermingling or 'rubbing sleeves' in this lively scene, painted barely two years before the devastating fire of 1657.

Right

Figure 15
Anonymous *Banquet with Music in Former Yoshiwara* circa1655 (detail), six-panel folding screen, ink and colour on paper. Private collection.

Right

Figure 16
Anonymous *Banquet with Music in Former Yoshiwara* circa1655 (detail), six-panel folding screen, ink and colour on paper. Private collection.

Above

Figure 17
Utagawa Toyoharu *Spring Scene in New Yoshiwara* circa 1790, six-panel folding screen, ink and colour on paper. Private collection.


大門口

After the horrifying fire, which burned for three days and consumed most of Edo, the Yoshiwara was quickly rebuilt, but in a new location 11 kilometres outside of the city, not only as a precaution against fires but also because it was very corrupting for young samurai men. As a concession to the brothel owners, the New Yoshiwara or 'Shin-Yoshiwara' precinct was allowed to open at night, which became in itself an exotic point of interest, offering the picturesque effects of night lighting. *Spring Scene in New Yoshiwara*, circa 1790, a six-panel folding screen which was also once part of a pair and painted by Utagawa Toyoharu (1735–1814), depicts the pleasure quarter (fig 17). Here one sees an atmospheric use of the silhouette device – the mysterious profiles of courtesans and their clients in the lit interiors of the brothels or 'green houses', traced with subtle ink on the paper windows panels – as well as a single-point perspective used in the construction of space. Both developments are related to the Western influence on Japanese art that began with the introduction of Western manuals and printed materials by the open-minded eighth *shōgun* Yoshimune. Numerous engravings of works by European masters of the 18th century, such as Canaletto's views, were included among these imports and many *ukiyo-e* artists, especially Toyoharu, looked at them for new inspiration and copied their compositional techniques.

Springtime in Toyoharu's scene is indicated by the cherry trees in full blossom, which were especially brought in fully-grown and budding each February to decorate the Nakanochō boulevard, which was the main street of the Yoshiwara, for the cherry blossom festival during March (fig 18). We also see *oiran* (the highest-level courtesans) together with their young assistants, parading through the darkening street with their manservants (*wakaimono*) carrying lanterns to light their paths, as they make their way from their tea houses to the places where they had to entertain their guests. Here again elegant figures mix with samurai and men from the merchant classes.

Left

Figure 18
Utagawa Toyoharu *Spring Scene in New Yoshiwara* circa 1790 (detail), six-panel folding screen, ink and colour on paper. Private collection.

The beauties or *bijin-ga* from the mid-17th to the end of the 19th century are in fact a development of the subjects introduced by these three screens discussed above. *Reading Beauty*, circa 1655 is one of the earliest examples of *bijin*, from the Kanbun era (1661–1673) (fig 19). A seated lady, whose smooth, rounded face and plump form recall a Tang Dynasty (618–907) Chinese noblewoman, is shown beside a small lectern reading a book; she seems quite plastic against the neutral background with her simply modelled body serving to display the ample folds of her richly decorated kimono. If we look closely at the portrayal of kimono throughout the *Enchanted Worlds* exhibition, which is broadly chronological, it is possible to trace a great development in the patterns, forms and textiles of this garment across the Edo period, as well evolutions in hairstyles, accessories and fashion in general as depicted by the masters and main schools. Another representative example of early *bijin-ga* is by Kaigetsudō Ando (fig 20). The Kaigetsudō School was one of the first dedicated to 'beautiful lady portraits', and it had a very standardised way of depicting them: with bold figures, bare feet and in swirling poses that show off the splendour of the dresses to maximum effect. Their kimono are delineated with long and thick black ink contours, in-filled with brilliant colours and, in this case, embellished with areas of raised gold, which renders the floral pattern even richer.

Right

Figure 19
Anonymous *Reading Beauty* circa1665, hanging scroll, ink and colour on silk. Private collection.

Far right

Figure 20
Kaigetsudō Ando *Standing Beauty* circa1710, hanging scroll, ink and colour on paper. Private collection.

From this early production, portraits of beautiful ladies and related subjects spread as a dominant trend among the several *ukiyo-e* schools in which the main masters of the Edo period trained and worked. Standing beauties were matched with symbolic natural backgrounds, such as a cherry tree or branch in full blossom, elegant willows or pines, and night skies during the full moon. Their sensual silhouettes were highlighted by artfully spontaneous poses and actions, such as shielding themselves against the snow, fending off the rain with an umbrella, refreshing their faces with round fans in the hot summer, or concentrating on reading a letter. More complex scenes featured ladies in more finished backgrounds, enjoying activities inside private spaces, during intimate moments, or simply strolling along the streets in the city or enjoying a spring or autumn party in the park.

Above

Figure 21
Yamazaki Jōryū *Beauty in a Mosquito Net* circa 1740, hanging scroll, ink and colour on paper. Private collection.

For example, in *Beauty in a Mosquito Net*, circa 1740 by Yamazaki Jōryū, we see a very sensual young lady emerging from a transparent mosquito net that partially drapes her loosely-clad figure (fig 21). This is an entirely private moment: she seems to be concentrating on reading a letter, laying with her left elbow resting on a cylindrical cushion while balancing a long pipe (*kiseru*) between her fingers and a round fan in her right hand. A lacquered tray on the ground holds some writing equipment, and behind her a *tokonoma* displays an ink landscape painted scroll, with some books piled on the *tatami* mat below.

A similarly private moment is also shown in *Beauty Teasing a Cat*, circa 1735, where again a young courtesan reclines in her room with the *obi* of her kimono knotted at the front, a clue to her occupation (fig 22). She has a long pipe in her left hand, which peeps out from inside the neck of her kimono. In front of her lies a lacquered tray with a *nécessaire* for smoking and a second prepared *kiseru* (pipe) for an awaited visitor. Her attention is caught by a cute little cat that climbs on her back, a motif inspired by the 11th-century narrative, *The Tale of Genji*, which links playful cats with seductive femininity. In the background a *tokonoma* decorated with a *chabana* floral arrangement (tea ceremony flowers) features spring flowers: a camelia and a prunus in a woven bamboo basket. The small rabbit sculpture positioned on the *tatami* may be placed there to welcome the New Year of the Rabbit (1734–1735). These two paintings, which are so sensual and which show their subjects in moments of privacy and repose, are in fact painted by one of the few known women artists of the period, and as such offer us an unusual insight into a female approach to the *bijin* subject. Okumura Masanobu, a specialist in painting *bijin-ga* and kabuki actors (*yakusha-e*), also depicted the popular subject of a *Beauty Teasing a Cat*, circa 1740: his courtesan is a statuesque and curvaceous figure, with her *obi* knotted in front, who distracts a cat and her kittens with a minute dragonfly attached to a fine thread, delicately traced with soft ink touches (fig 23). Another beauty, this time by Kitao Masanobu, painted at the end of the 18th century, shows a classical and quite standardized portrait of a young lady walking outdoors with her paper umbrella and long sleeved kimono (*furisode*), details that tell us she is very young and not yet married (fig 24). A significant addition to the portrait is a black cloudy ink sky in which a small cuckoo can barely be seen. Its call has arrested the attention of the lady, who stops and cocks her head to listen and reflect. As has already been noted, the presence of flowers and birds in Japanese art is always evocative of the seasons, and this cuckoo transports us into early summer both in painting and in poetry.

Below

Figure 22
Yamazaki Jōryū *Beauty Teasing a Cat* circa1735, hanging scroll, ink and colour on paper. Private collection.

Above

Figure 23
Okumura Masanobu *Beauty Teasing a Cat*
circa1740, hanging scroll, ink and colour on silk.
Private collection.

Above

Figure 24
Kitao Masanobu *Beauty and Little Cuckoo*
circa1785, hanging scroll, ink and colour on silk.
Private collection.

Above

Figure 25
Katsukawa Shunshō *Beauty under Plum Tree*
circa1785, hanging scroll, ink and colour on silk.
Private collection.

Katsukawa Shunshō, who was the master of Hokusai, also specialised in female portraits and actors, and his style is considered to be one of the most successful of the second part of the 18th century (fig 25). His beauties are slim with long bodies: the lines of their kimono are subtle and elegant, and their faces are thin, a precursor to the 'melon seed' facial type that is associated with Hokusai's *bijin*. Here again, the young lady is associated with the cherry blossoms, evoking both the transience of nature and the evanescence of female beauty – and therefore the necessity of enjoying each moment of life. In the *Banquet at the Green House*, circa 1788 we can feel this perfectly (fig 26). Two samurai guests entertain themselves with a group of beautiful courtesans in a tea house near the river. Everything speaks of the highest luxury and elegance, as though we are looking at a page from *Vogue*: the sumptuous clothing and accessories of each person present; the red and black lacquered small table in the centre of the group with a fish served on a plate. But this is not just any fish. It is a red sea bream or *tai* – prized as a lucky symbol because it plays with the homophonous Japanese word *omedetai*, meaning 'auspicious' or 'celebratory'. Shunshō has arranged every detail to please the senses and induce relaxation: the lacquered tray on the *tatami* mat with bowls, chopsticks and a tea pot all placed within easy reach; the lacquered smoking set (*tabakobon*) with hot coals, the long *kiseru* pipe and tobacco pouch left open nearby; and the sliding screen doors painted with a landscape of bamboo in ink to charm the eye while blocking drafts and creating privacy. The perfect elegance and ease implied by these details is also reflected in the interactions of the individuals – their animated conversation is suggested by rhythmic movement and hand gestures.

The counterpart of this interior scene of enjoyment is Miyagawa Isshō's painting *Cherry-Blossom Party*, circa 1745 showing *hanami*, the viewing of the blossoming cherry trees, which in Japan is the most important moment for enjoying the spring (fig 27). Musicians and dancers entertain a group of samurai (hidden beneath their straw hats) and courtesans with their child attendants in a park. Together they create a lively composition with their colourful costumes and patterns, complete with exotic touches from South Asia, India and Persia, whose influence from the 16th century onward was pervasive.

Top

Figure 26
Katsukawa Shunshō *Banquet at the Green House* circa 1788, hanging scroll, ink and colour on silk. Private collection.

Bottom

Figure 27
Miyagawa Isshō *Cherry-Blossom Party* circa 1745, hanging scroll, ink and colour on silk. Private collection.

In *Beauties Enjoying the Cool of the Evening*, circa 1795 by Utagawa Toyoharu (whose screen of the Shin-Yoshiwara from the same decade you have already seen), we observe again his blending of Western and Japanese style (fig 28). Here, three beauties at the foot of a bridge stand before a detailed background that is a true or realistic scene of the landscape, rendered in black ink lines and offering a perspectival view of the buildings as we might see in a European etching. It's summer and the women are shown dressed in light kimono enjoying the evening breeze. They carry *uchiwa* (round fans) in their hands as they listen to the singing of crickets in a small cage, while two puppies frolic at their feet.

Right

Figure 28
Utagawa Toyoharu *Enjoying the Cool of the Evening* circa 1795, hanging scroll, ink and colour on silk. Private collection.

Utagawa Toyoharu's mastery of black ink is again on show in his portraits of *Matsukaze and Murasame*, 1789–1801, which he uses in contrast with vivid red to meticulously describe the beautiful kimonos (fig 29). Note also the curling waves and white plovers – both symbols of female beauty – which decorate the hems of their garments. These plovers were traditionally thought to be born from the foam of breaking waves and are details also depicted by Hiroshige in his *Great Waves of Sōshū Shichiriga-hama*, circa 1847 (fig 48). Another work with an extraordinary use of subtle black ink is *Beauty with Newly-washed Hair*, circa 1800, by Kubo Shunman (1757–1820), a portrait of a courtesan with her long raven hair just washed, free of any styling, except for the red ribbon binding the ends (fig 30). Dismantling the elaborate hairstyles for washing was a difficult, infrequent and time-consuming procedure. The subject was interesting for this point, but primarily because it offered a subtle opportunity to portray intimacy, capturing a private moment in the life of these beautiful ladies. The motif had enduring popularity and appears in many woodblock prints during the Edo and Meiji periods

Above

Figure 29
Utagawa Toyoharu *Matsukaze and Murasame*
1789–1801, hanging scroll, ink and colour on silk. Private collection.

Above

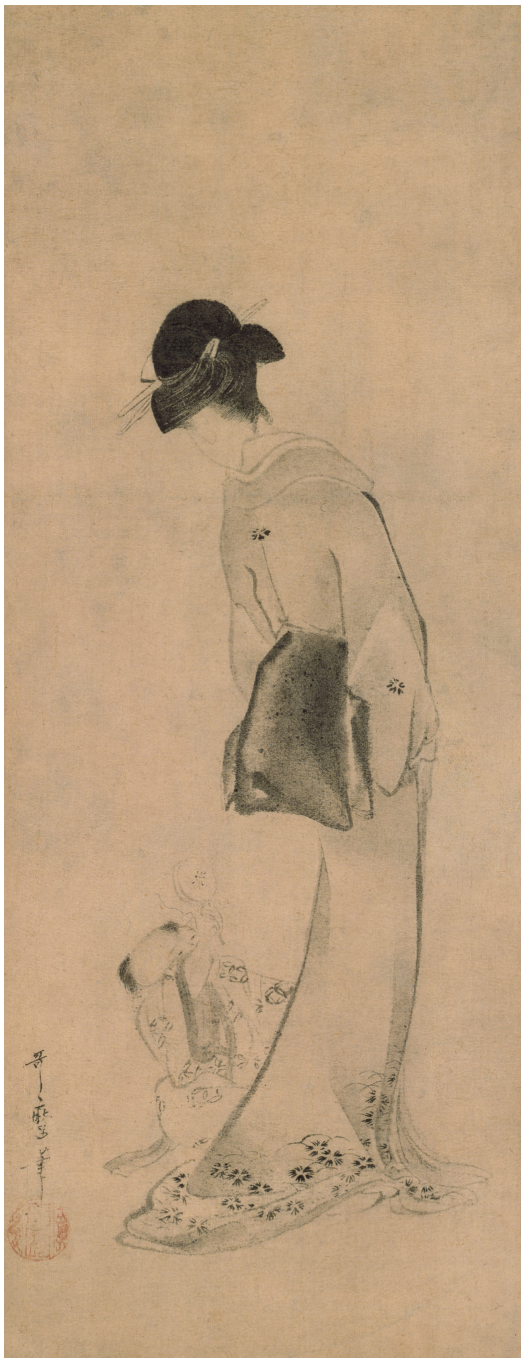
Figure 30
Kubo Shunman *Beauty with Newly-washed Hair*
circa 1800, hanging scroll, ink and colour on silk. Private collection.

Kitagawa Utamaro is considered the master *par excellence* of the female beauty portrait, both in colours and in monochrome ink (*sumi-e*). *Enchanted Worlds* is remarkable for its inclusion of four paintings by Utamaro, which are exceptionally rare. Utamaro brought a psychological approach to the depiction of beauty that had not been seen before. His woodblock prints with half-length or 'bust' portraits count among the most beautiful portraits of beauties, for the expression of their subjects' emotion and character. In this respect Utamaro's *bijin-ga* can be considered as the counterpart of the bust-length portraits of kabuki actors (*ōkubi-e*). *Beauty Reading a Letter*, circa 1806 is a fascinating and large portrait of an *oiran*, whose pose while reading a letter is highly sensual – she is a sort of fashion model (fig 31). The elegance of the kimono and the over-kimono (*uchikake*) is emphasised, as are the sumptuous textiles and patterns with the gold thread embroidered *obi* on her front, the flocks of plovers on her hem and sleeves, and her striking 'lantern locks' (*tōrōbin shimada*) hairdo, adorned with numerous long hairpins.

Right

Figure 31
Kitagawa Utamaro *Beauty Reading a Letter* circa 1806, hanging scroll, ink and colour on paper. Private collection.

Altogether different from *Beauty Reading a Letter* in their treatment and tone are Utamaro's *Mother and Child* and *Beauty under a Cherry Tree*, both circa 1795, depicted only with black ink, a shift which reflects the growing government hostility to lax morality and the luxury consumption of the *chōnin* class (figs 32 & 33). As portraits of courtesans became targets for censorship, Utamaro was obliged to turn to the subject of mothers and children. Utamaro, like all *ukiyo-e* artists, was increasingly forced to seek alternatives to the subjects of *oiran*, kabuki actors and the pleasure quarters, whose fame they had helped to promote through their artworks. As a result *ukiyo-e* artists focused on depicting townswomen and limited the number of colours used in their paintings and prints. With the support of their publishers they also turned to different subjects, such as landscapes. Nevertheless, their work was greatly affected, and Utamaro was even imprisoned in 1804 because of his perceived independence of authority.



Far left

Figure 32
Kitagawa Utamaro *Mother and Child* circa 1795, hanging scroll, ink and colour on paper. Private collection.

Left

Figure 33
Kitagawa Utamaro *Beauty under a Cherry Tree* circa 1795, hanging scroll, ink and colour on paper. Private collection.

Kitagawa Utamaro II, pupil of Utamaro who took the name of his master, continued working in the subject area in which his famous teacher excelled, but he developed his own style and more sophisticated figures. A classic example of this is *Beauty in the Snow*, circa 1810, which shows a young girl advancing through the snow under her umbrella. She twists her body in order to pin her kimono closed over her knees, while her bare feet are sensually exposed in her high wooden *geta* (platform sandals) (fig 34). The intense white of the snow, which heightens a sense of its freezing coldness, is produced using *gofun*, a pigment made with ground clam shells prepared as a paste. We see again plovers, along with *sakura* (cherry blossom) which together with the young lady's long sleeves indicate that she is unmarried. This dynamic composition was one that was much favoured by *ukiyo-e* masters both in painting and prints, and it became a very seductive standardised portrait pose that even influenced early Japanese photographers of the 19th century in their first hand-coloured studio photographs.

Right

Figure 34
Kitagawa Utamaro II *Beauty in the Snow*
circa 1810, hanging scroll, ink and colour on silk.
Private collection.

Clam Digging, circa 1802 is a recently discovered work by Katsushika Hokusai of a subject he painted many times. This version shows two women gathering clams on the beach with a child in a fascinating composition that includes part of a boat in the foreground (fig 35). The long outlines of the women's narrow faces and kimono are characteristic of Hokusai's subtle linear elegance in his portraits from this period, in a career marked by continuous changes of style as he evolved different approaches to his subjects. In many respects Hokusai represents the peak of the development of the subject of beauties. After that, their poses became a little more artificial, as can be seen in the *bijin-ga* by Hokusai's pupil, the brilliant colourist Teisai Hokuba, whose forms nevertheless lack the subtle individual modelling of his master (fig 36). The figures themselves also got larger and the manner of their depiction was increasingly influenced by Western painting.

Left

Figure 35
Katsushika Hokusai *Clam Digging* circa 1802, hanging scroll, ink and colour on silk. Private collection.

Left

Figure 36
Teisai Hokuba *Beauties in an Autumn Field* circa 1830 (detail), hanging scroll, ink and colour on silk. Private collection.

In concluding this discussion of beauties, a few final examples deserve special attention. One is the portrait of the kabuki actor Iwai Hanshirō V performing the role of a female courtesan depicted by Utagawa Toyokuni (1769–1825)(fig 37). Female actors were banned from kabuki theatre from the 1620s and Iwai Hanshirō V (1776–1847) was one of the famous specialists in cross-gender performance, known as an *onnagata*, renowned for their convincing impersonations of the most beautiful and sensual women of the age. Another is a painting by Chōbunsai Eishi (1756–1829), which is notable for its highly auspicious iconography. *Courtesan and Her Attendant under Cherry Blossoms*, circa 1810 shows a beauty wearing the 'butterfly' hairstyle (*yoko hyōgo*) with her child attendant (*kamuro*), wearing a red *uchikake* with a turtle embroidered upon it, a lucky Chinese character, and a symbol of wisdom, protection and long life (fig 38).

Below left

Figure 37
Utagawa Toyokuni *Iwai Hanshirō V* circa1810, hanging scroll, ink and colour on paper. Private collection.

Below right

Figure 38
Chōbunsai Eishi *Courtesan and Her Attendant under Cherry Blossoms* circa 1810, hanging scroll, ink and colour on silk. Private collection.

Finally the painting *Five Beauties*, circa 1825, by Kansetsusai Tsukimaro (active 1804, died 1836) is remarkable for its sophisticated frieze-like horizontal composition, showing the convincing interaction of five female figures conversing with each other: their bodies form an asymmetrical movement as they descend from a veranda in their colourful dresses, animating a subdued landscape backdrop rendered with Western perspective and ink used to show shadows (fig 39).

Left

Figure 39
Kansetsusai Tsukimaro *Five Beauties*
circa 1825, hanging scroll, ink and colour on silk.
Private collection.

As the influence of Western painting and taste grew at the turn of the Meiji period, representation of city life became increasingly descriptive and started to rely more heavily on the methods of perspective and chiaroscuro first used by Utagawa Toyoharu and his generation. In *Enchanted Worlds* a group of paintings by Yanagi Bunchō II (active circa 1764–1801), Kawahara Keiga (born 1786, active 1860s) (fig 1) and Toyohara Kunichika (1835–1900) exemplify this development. At the same time they reveal a distinctly empirical interest in the several classes of the city – a sort of ethnological and anthropological point of view that is clearly a response to the demands of the Western market and to the first collectors and lovers of Japanese art who visited or began living in Japan in the first decades after the opening of the ports. *Storefront Scene of Echigoya at Surugacho*, circa 1815 by Yanagi Bunchō II, for example, accurately documents the sale of kimono and luxury items, which would have been a point of curiosity for Western viewers (fig 40). Some of these paintings formed part of the collection of the famous Dutch physician and traveller to Japan, Philipp Franz von Siebold (1796–1866) and were shown in the Japanese pavilion at the 1873 International Exposition in Paris. Examples of this 'export-style' genre have started to come back to Japan only recently. Thus it is clear that while we are still speaking about *ukiyo-e*, it is really only *ukiyo-e* in its final phase of production, when prints functioned as a kind of propaganda, required to accommodate the demands of illustrated news and the Meiji government.

Above

Figure 40
Yanagi Bunchō II *Storefront Scene of Echigoya at Surugacho* circa 1815, framed painting, ink and colour on silk. Private collection.

Divine and Legendary Worlds

An artist whose diverse literary and cultural interests allowed him to move away with unparalleled success from the traditional subjects of courtesans and actors that were the standard fare of *ukiyo-e* was Katsushika Hokusai. A small but significant section of *Enchanted Worlds* features a series of 11 *kakemono* by Hokusai from an original set of 12 titled *Immortals, Gods of Good Fortune and Kyōgen Actors*, 1839. The individual vignettes are taken from literature and theatre, legends, myths and popular religion, and are treated with the classical ironic and humorous touch that only this master was able to give to any subject. Daikoku, for example, one of the seven deities of good fortune, has been depicted with a big *daikon* on his shoulder, probably because the name Daikoku and the vegetable *daikon* sound the same, but the visual joke is surely the sexy female shape of the pale and gleaming radish (fig 41).

Left

Figure 41
Katsushika Hokusai *Two-legged Radish and Daikoku* from *Immortals, Gods of Good Fortune and Kyogen Actors* 1839, one hanging scroll from a set of 11, ink and colour on silk. Private collection.

Right

Figure 42
Katsushika Hokusai *Dragon and Clouds* 1834, hanging scroll, ink and colour on silk. Private collection.

Paintings of animals – legendary, mythological and real – are also highlighted in this section, such as the two beautiful dragons depicted by Hokusai, who has applied black ink of varying intensity (*tarashikomi* technique) with a freedom akin to waterplay (fig 42). The dragon itself is considered a divine animal, related to water and rain, and is invariably shown emerging from water, ascending to the sky and enveloped by wet clouds in Japanese and Chinese art. Dragons frequently appear on scrolls and screens alongside tigers and bamboo, symbols of the earth power. This complementary combination which brings together the *ten* (sky or heaven) and *chi* (earth) is intrinsic to the *kata* – or training exercise – of martial arts. All the animals by Hokusai have humanised eyes and expressions and virtually all his last paintings were of animals – dragons, tigers, Chinese lions, fish, eagles and foxes, considered as talismans of good fortune and longevity. They express the genius of Hokusai, his capacity for describing each detail with realism and drama, in vivid colours or just black ink.

Erudite and eclectic, Hokusai repeatedly demonstrated his ability to work in traditional Japanese and Western modes at the same time, as is evident in the marvelous *Cock, Hen and Bamboo*, circa 1804, a painting that shows awareness of the 17th-century Dutch *animalier* artists, and which has only recently returned to Japan after its rediscovery in a Dutch collection (fig 43). Hokusai constantly changed signatures and seals, which he placed on the lower sections of his paintings, according to the period. He also took to inscribing his age '84', '87', '88' years old, after he abandoned the series production of woodblock prints and freed himself from commercial demands.

Left

Figure 43
Katsushika Hokusai *Cock, Hen and Bamboo*
circa1804, hanging scroll, ink and colour on silk.
Private collection.

Right

Figure 44
Keisai Eisen *Gateway to Success* circa 1825, hanging scroll, ink and colour on paper. Tekisuiken Cultural Foundation.

Another artist in this period who occasionally departed from the depiction of courtesans to explore other subjects from nature, and who was influenced by Hokusai, was Keisai Eisen, represented here by a painting of a giant carp, a creature related to the dragon, which is depicted in energetic strokes and colours (fig 44). This again is a classical subject taken from the animal world which symbolises force, courage and bravery. The carp (*koi*) was believed capable of climbing waterfalls to become the dragon of the sky – a feat of strength and determination for which it was made the symbol and mascot of Boys' Day. On this annual national holiday, celebrated on the fifth day of the fifth month, the carp is flown in the form of kites and streamers (*koinobori*). Thus it is clear that the aim in depicting animal themes is not primarily to achieve 'true views' or naturalistic representations, but rather to convey their symbolic meaning: the pine and the crane, or the pine and the eagle are both auspicious symbols of longevity and power and for that reason such subjects were usually chosen as backgrounds on the walls or screens of the high rank samurai residences to project a presence of wealth and power.

Nature and Landscape

A major new subject area of *ukiyo-e* production that emerged in the 19th century was that of *meisho* or 'famous places'. Known mainly through popular woodblock prints, images of famous landmarks were also painted by *ukiyo-e* masters on screens and hanging scrolls. The genre developed during the Edo period in tandem with travel guides, maps and literature. Images of famous sites permitted the Japanese to know parts of the territory they had never seen or could never visit, because travel was not free nor possible for all the classes. Apart from the enjoyment of the outdoor beautiful places near the capital, travel in Japan was mainly linked to religious pilgrimages or official movements from the provinces to Edo.

Below

Figure 45
Katsushika Hokusai *Mt Fuji of the Daybreak*
1843, hanging scroll, ink and colour on silk.
Libera Corporation.

Above

Figure 46
Katsushika Hokusai *Mt Fuji through Pines* 1847, hanging scroll, ink and colour on silk. Private collection.

Two works by *Hokusai, Mt Fuji of the Daybreak*, 1843 (fig 45) and *Mt Fuji through Pines*, 1847 (fig 46) represent the most important *meisho* of all, that of Mt Fuji, the highest mountain in Japan. A sacred mountain and the main pilgrimage site for Shintō believers (*Fuji-ko*), Fuji was the place to which every Japanese in the Edo period aspired to travel at least once in their lifetime. The colours are realistic: note the use of the greens for the tree foliage in *Mt Fuji of the Daybreak*; the blue against black ink to create the intensity of clouds and the mist at the foot of the mountain. Observe also the strokes which show Hokusai's mastery in using Western-like techniques to express the changing light on that side of the Fuji. In *Mt Fuji through Pines*, the double-trunked pine tree, which encloses the mountain as if through a camera lens, demonstrates yet again the characteristically strong visual impact of Hokusai's compositions, also seen in his woodblock prints series *Thirty-Six Views of Mt Fuji*, 1830–32. This image is the 'postcard of all postcards' we might say. At least it was from Hokusai's perspective, who applied his seal and the inscription *hyaku* or '100', an auspicious number and a reference to the age at which (according to his 1834 book) he believed he would become a 'real' artist.

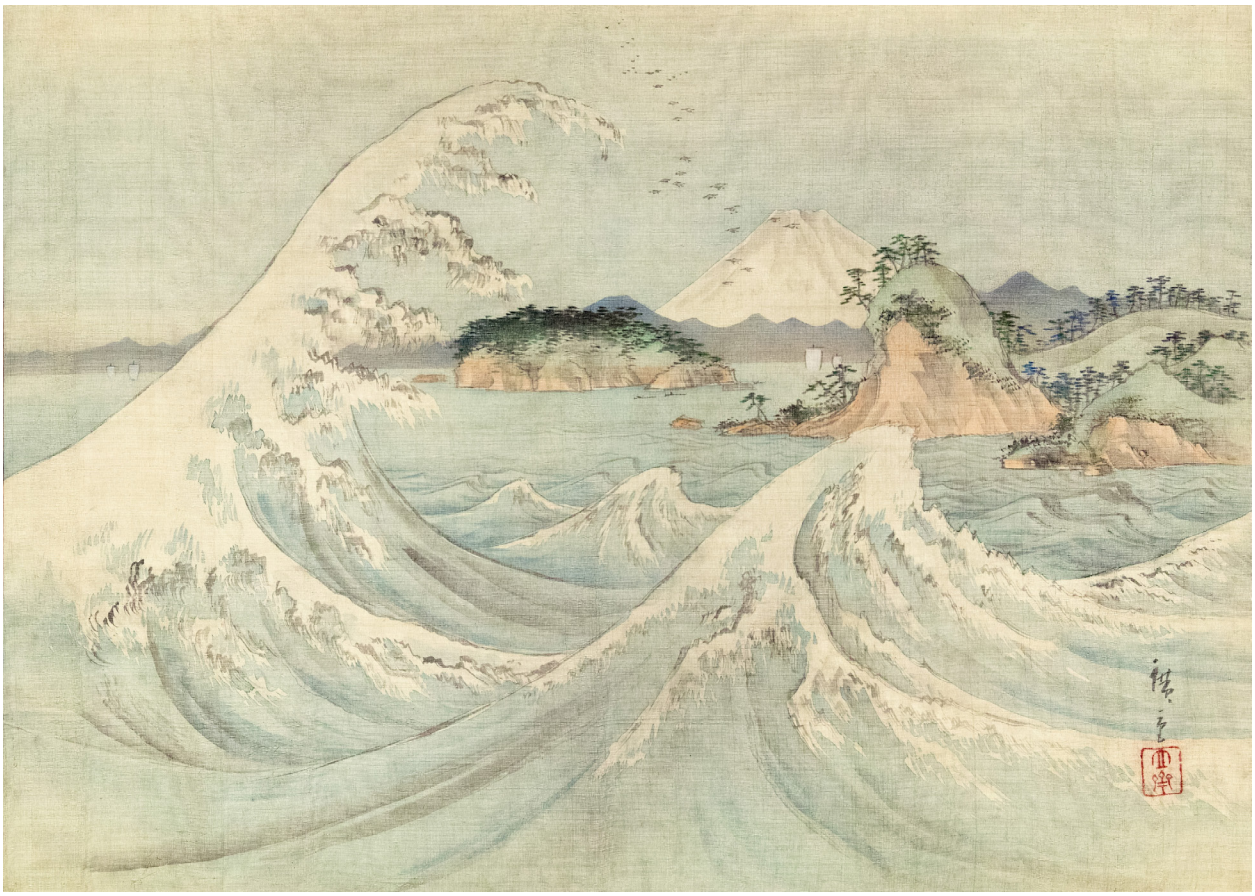
The paintings by Hokusai's younger rival Utagawa Hiroshige, exhibited in the final section of *Enchanted Worlds*, allow us to see clearly the difference between the two most famous landscape artists of the Edo period – their different approaches to nature and to painting. Hiroshige repeatedly treated the same subjects in his scrolls and prints, such as the small island of Enoshima (fig 47) and the beach of Shichiriga-hama, from which you can see *both* Enoshima and Mt Fuji (fig 48). These were famous locations, loved by the population of Edo as destinations for brief daily trips outside the city, places recognised both for their natural beauty – the quiet sea with long waves, the cherry blossoming, the view of the Fuji, the caves on the rock mountain – and the presence of the Benten shrine on the top of the island, a Shintō pilgrimage destination.

Below top

Figure 47
Utagawa Hiroshige *Enoshima* circa 1855, hanging scroll, ink and colour on silk. Libera Corporation.

Below bottom

Figure 48
Utagawa Hiroshige *Great Waves of Sōshū Shichiriga-hama* 1847, hanging scroll, ink and colour on silk. Private collection.



Hiroshige depicted waterfalls and mountain landscapes associated with the beauty of the seasons and exploited multiple sets of scrolls to enlarge his views (fig 49). Where Hokusai's images are infused with energy, Hiroshige's colours are transparent and light. His strokes describe rapidly but minutely the entire landscape to convey a sense of universal beauty and calm. Even when he evidently quotes Hokusai's masterpiece painting *The Great Wave* in his view of Shichiriga-hama, Hiroshige's version becomes in some way more realistic, soft and poetic, without the dramatic force that is unique to Hokusai's work.

Right

Figure 49
Utagawa Hiroshige *Settsu Nunobiki Male Waterfall / Settsu Nunobiki Female Waterfall* circa 1850, Diptych of hanging scrolls, ink and colour on silk. Mr Ei Nakau.

Both Hokusai and Hiroshige demonstrate a different conception of nature and landscape compared to the Western one. For these *ukiyo-e* artists, theirs was a repeated and well-known nature, not a nature to be discovered and conquered, but rather a sacred nature of which human beings are part. During my first visit to New Zealand, I feel Māori beliefs are very close to this pantheistic way of thought, and this offers a unique opportunity to the New Zealand public to connect with deep Japanese feelings beyond the borders of culture.

Further Reading

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Rossella Menegazzo is an internationally renowned curator and scholar of Japanese painting, prints, graphic design and photography.

Over the past 15 years she has curated many exhibitions of Japanese art, which have been displayed in Italy, Europe, and now, New Zealand. Recent exhibitions that she has curated, with accompanying catalogues, include: *Hokusai, Hiroshige, Hasui. Travelling in a Changing Japan* (Pinacoteca Agnelli, Turin, 2018–19); *Hiroshige. Visions from Japan* (Scuderie del Quirinale, Rome, 2018); *Hokusai: The Master's Legacy* (Ara Pacis, Rome, 2017–18); *The Japanese Renaissance. Nature on Painted Screens from the 15th to the 17th Centuries* (Gallerie degli Uffizi, Florence, 2017); *Domon Ken: Master of Japanese Realism* (Museo dell'Ara Pacis, Rome, 2016); *Hokusai, Hiroshige, Utamaro* (Palazzo Reale, Milan, 2016). Menegazzo has produced significant publications such as *LOST JAPAN. Felice Beato and Nineteenth-century Yokohama Photography* (Electa, 2017); WA: *The Essence of Japanese Design* (Phaidon, 2014) and has contributed to a number of international publications including *Hiroshige: L'Art du Voyage* (Pinacothèque de Paris, 2013).

A distinguished scholar, Menegazzo is the associate professor of East Asian Art History at the University of Milan, a position that she has held since 2012. Her PhD, obtained in 2009 in Oriental Studies at Ca' Foscari University in Venice, examined the influences of *ukiyo-e* on Japanese photography produced in the Bakumatsu Meiji period (1853–1912). In 2017 she received the Japanese Foreign Minister's Commendations for her work in promoting research into Japan and Japanese culture in Italy.

When speaking of her research and her curatorial practice, Menegazzo says that she likes to convey 'how the knowledge of a different culture can give a new way to approach and understand humanity, dismantling what you think is obvious to try something new, that you don't even know can exist. This widens one's own freedom.'

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