Ukiyo-e

Pictures of the Floating World

Auckland City Art Gallery
25 September—11 November 1984

7 Koryusai
Ladies entertaining themselves c1780
hashira

Cover.
24 Hokkei
(detail) Liu Pang killing a dragon c1815/35
surimono

Ukiyo-e

Pictures of the Floating World

COLOUR WOODBLOCK PRINTS FROM THE MACKELVIE COLLECTION

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The Context

Given the current influence of Japanese thought in fashion, ukiyo-e is an apt title for this exhibition. The term translates literally as "pictures of a floating world" and contains a strong implication of the changing nature of fashion.

In early Buddhist terminology, ukiyo-e meant "floating" in the sense of transience, as in the passing of a brief, unhappy earthly existence. As applied to the philosophy of an art movement that appeared in Edo (Tokyo) in the late 17th century it referred to the all-too-brief passage of very worldly pleasures; the ever changing face of fashion in the demi-monde. About as far as possible in fact from its original religious implications — the type of irony in which the increasingly sophisticated Japanese of the period delighted.

Woodblock printing was not the only medium for expressing the new-found fascination in the activities spawned by city life, but it was that medium par excellence. There are ukiyo paintings, lacquer works, textiles, ceramics — in short, its influence appeared in every field of fine or applied art. But woodblock printing as an art form that was born out of the new social conditions and reinforced them in turn — it lived, flourished and died in exact parallel to the social order that it portrayed.

What was this new social order? It arose from political stability, from political repression, from rational seclusion, from the change of emphasis from rural to urban values. By 1603 and after centuries of civil wars, Japan had finally been unified under the Shogun Ieyasu. As well as being a virtuoso military tactician Ieyasu was a capable administrator and thus his family, the Tokugawa, were able to so organise the country's affairs that they remained supreme for just over two and a half centuries. With the sole exception of the Dutch trading post on an island in Nagasaki harbour, Japan was declared universally off limits to foreigners. Strict laws were promulgated stratifying society into the existing hierarchy: samurai (military), farmers, artisans, merchants. An indication of governmental attitudes to the lower classes was the Kafkaesque direction to magistrates not to advise the citizens what the laws were, as that might lead to discussion and possible dissension. An effective police state was created which was almost successful in maintaining the status quo.

The problem lay with the samurai, the "upper" class who, in a time of peace, had no work and who rapidly therefore fell into the invidious position of having all the status but very little of the wherewithal to support it. The merchants became increasingly wealthy by taking outrageous and, one suspects, vindictive advantage of these disadvantaged gentry. Being strictly forbidden access to any of the traditional forms of political, social or cultural involvement, they were prevented from exercising that important prerogative of wealth, the display thereof. But if they couldn't display themselves ostentatiously they could give it to others to do so on their behalf. Which they did, and in the doing chose as vehicles those persons and activities of their own social milieu — prostitutes, actors and wrestlers. And because the demi-monde has always had a fatal attraction to members of supposed superior classes, all of the government's frequent forced and brutal extraction and reallocation of money from these outlets of merchant extravagance only resulted in its returning to source, and more besides.

So it was that wood block printing — cheap, repetitive, far removed from the classical arts of landscape painting and calligraphy — came to be the favoured art form of the nouveau riche merchant class, with subject matter to match: the fashionable clothing of the Yoshiwara courtesans (as well as their more personal charms), actors from popular kabuki dramas and, to a lesser extent, sporting heroes in the guise of sumo wrestlers. All had one factor in common: they were subject to the vagaries of fashion — pictures of a floating world.

The Print

The creation of a ukiyo-e print involved three people: artist, engraver and printer. Perhaps that should be four, because as often as not the idea for a print or series would come from the publisher, a man whose influence is seldom fully appreciated. He controlled and financed the whole process and, in many ways, the course of woodblock printing is the measure of taste resident in the publishers of the day.

Once the artist had produced a design in brush-drawn ink on transparent paper it would be passed to the engraver who would cut a key block by fixing the design paper to a cherry wood block and chiselling away all intermediate areas not intended to register. From this key block on appropriate number of prints would be run, which were returned to the artist and used by him to indicate the desired colours. The batch was then passed back to the engraver who cut the relevant number of blocks, one for each colour, before handing them on to the printer. The last named would mix the colours, hopefully corresponding to the artist's intentions, and run off some 200 prints. This was done by laying damp mulberry fibre paper on the face of each block then rubbing it vigorously with a bamboo pad known as a baren.

Engravers and printers were powerful people and it was not uncommon for the engraver to change the design if he thought it better, or the printer to use different colours from those indicated. This was even encouraged in some cases as they employed people who knew up to the minute what was fashionable in the way of hair arrangements, or kimono patterns and colours. That this was not always a harmonious arrangement is evident from surviving letters written by Hokusai to his publisher in which he complains bitterly about the engraver changing all his eyes and noses to those of Toyokuni.

Overseeing all of this and the marketing, for his was the sole financial risk, was the publisher. And therefore it is the publisher who has been universally condemned for the dramatic fall in standards that rapidly overtook woodblock printing in the early part of the 19th century. The huge public demand for prints saw publishers rushing them on to the street within a few days of the opening of a new play. Artists designed from specially reserved seats at dress rehearsals and other artists stood by to redesign if a leading actor changed his costume on opening night. The element of art in the process was disappearing, the financial considerations becoming all-demanding. Publishers also began to sell used blocks from successful series to other publishers — and this might occur not just once but many times — who would run more prints from them, usually using fewer colours to disguise the lack of clarity or even recutting some areas. This process had reached epidemic proportions by the days of Hiroshige's popularity in the second quarter of the 19th century when, it has been calculated, up to 10,000 copies of some prints were issued.

Viewers should realise that Japanese art has evolved over millenia artistic concepts totally different from our own, this being particularly noticeable vis-a-vis perspective. The Japanese artist was no less skilled than his western counterpart either as a conceptualist or a technician, he simply created by different rules.

What then are the distinguishing characteristics of ukiyo-e prints? Above all, line — superbly elegant line which acts as a framework for the rest of the print. Secondly, distribution of mass and detail on a flat surface. Finally, colour, flat blocks of colour which create an effect quite different from chiaroscuro but just as pleasing and more appropriate to the two-dimensional form. These and the extraordinary technical skills of the artisans involved set the best of these prints into a class of their own as works of art.

The Exhibition

Most of the prints in this exhibition came from the collection of the late Captain G. Humphrey-Davies. The gallery's collection, which now numbers some 300 prints, is strongest in those artists who worked in the first half of the 19th century. However, there are representative works from all the major ukiyo-e schools and artists, save one, from 1720 onwards, including early artists of formative influence on the movement.

Therefore this exhibition has been organised to display the historical development of the woodblock print and the exhibits are numbered in approximate chronological sequence accordingly.

In broad terms there are two styles running through ukiyo-e designs. The first can be regarded as commencing with Hishikawa Moronobu (1625 -1694) and developed by Torri Kiyonobu (1664 -1729), the founder of the Torii school. It was distinguished by a powerful, clean line and forceful disposition of design elements. The name Torii, incidentally, derives from a family of kabuki theatre sign writers and became a semi-official title passed down from one generation to the next well into the 19th century. The second style avoided the drama inherent in the works of the first and was representative of a much gentler view of life where the line and the mood are more graceful than strong. This approach first arises under the name of Nishikawa Sukenobu (print 1; 1671-1751) who worked primarily in the area of book illustration and was a native of Kyoto, the Emperor's city, whose inhabitants prided themselves on their refinement, in contradistinction to the roughnecks of Edo. Sukenobu introduced the fragile beauty of Japanese women into ukiyo-e subject matter, a feature that was later taken to the extreme by Suzuki Harunobu (1725 -1770), to merge finally with the first stylistic lineage in the culminating works of Torii Kiyonagaa (1752 -1815) and Kitagawa Utamaro (1753 -1806).

8 Kiyonaga
Courtesans and attendant c1780
chuban

3 Toshinobu
Scene from a kabuki drama c1740
hosoban

Okumura Masanobu (print 2; 1685 -1764) was the greatest eclectic of the 18th century and, although an excellent artist, like most eclectics, he made no significant stylistic contribution to the art form. His contribution was important, nonetheless, as he invented or popularised a number of notable technical developments, including two colour printing, the hashira (pillar print) and triptych formats and, as represented in this exhibition, the urushie (lacquer print). Until this time only outlines had been block printed and the prints then coloured by hand. Masanobu applied the colours to the block and rapidly, from the 1750s, this became the norm. It was polychrome printing that provided the primary means for Harunobu to establish his reputation. This he did not only by means of subtle but evocative colouring, but also by taking the Sukenoby woman and immortalising her as the frail, angelic, endlessly youthful creature of another, more perfect world.

The urushie, however, was an earlier invention and constituted an attempt to add life to the print's surface by varying its texture. Solid colour areas, especially black, were coated with a mixture of pigment and glue, and perhaps sprinkled with brass dust, thereby adding body and shine to the print's appearance. Masanobu's son, Okumura Toshinobu (print 3; worked 1725-1750) forms a direct stylistic link between Sukenobu and Harunobu and specialised in lacquer prints. Unfortunately, the lacquer (so-called, it has no real lacquer in it) does not age well, cracking and fading with time, and so the viewer must largely imagine the distinctive nature of these prints.

Polychrome printing and Harunobu introduced the "classical" period of block printing. Harunobu's pupil Isoda Koryusai (prints 6 and 7; worked 1760-80) was one of only two known cases of persons of samurai rank voluntarily reducing their status by becoming ukiyo-e artists. This may have been forced on him by circumstance, as it appears that he was a ronin, a samurai without a master, the loss of patronage being occasioned by the death or disgrace of his lord. Like Masanobu an experimenter with form, it was Koryusai who settled on what was to be the most popular size of print sheet, namely 380 x 250 mm and known as oban. But he achieved greatest renown in that unbelievably difficult design format, the hashira, which measures about 685 x 127mm vertically. Never far away as a motivating force in this people's art, money was again the catalyst in the birth of this print type. The Japanese house lacks solid walls so that the only permanent surfaces which a houseowner can decorate are its pillars. Hence the absurd dimensions of the pillar print. These prints were always in demand, although very few have survived in even mediocre condition owing to the rigours involved in their constant exposure.

The collection has only one example of Kiyonaga's work and that (print 8) is in the smaller chuban format (280 x 200 mm). It does however demonstrate the formal elegance and dignity that distinguish the master's work and is a typical composition of courtesans "on parade" with an attendant. Kiyonaga leads directly to Kitagawa Utamaro (prints 15 and 16; 1753 -1806), who dominated the 1790s as Kiyonaga had the previous decade. Argument continues as to which man was the greater artist. Even though sometimes labelled "mannerist", Utamaro's ladies have an immediacy that replaces Kiyonaga's reserve — the latter's parades of courtesans can be so stately as to resemble religious processions. Utamaro lived for some time with Tsutaya Jusaburo, the most discriminating publisher of the age, whose shop was right by the main gate of the Yoshiwara (official brothel quarter of Edo). He spent large amounts of time there, and in picturing its courtesans he exhibits an understanding and sympathy for these women that is very reminiscent of the works of Toulouse-Lautrec in Paris a century later.

Prints 13 and 14 are by Chobunsai Eishi (1756-1815), the second of ukiyo-e's important artists to be of samurai rank. In this case Eishi had been appointed as a court painter to the Shogun Ieharu and the reasons for his involvement with ukiyo-e print making remain a mystery. He was a great admirer of Kiyonaga but is known to have copied a number of Utamaro's works and is considered his only serious rival of that period. Courtesan prints with a distinctive yellow background were his forte, and their pure fluid line is as pleasing as any artist's.

Mention must be made of Toshusai Sharaku, although he is not represented in this collection. A phenomenon without a history, he burst on to the Edo scene in 1794/95 for a period of approximately 10 months and just as suddenly vanished, having produced some 145 known prints, including a number of bust or "big head" portraits of leading kabuki actors that are his trademark. The drama and power of these extraordinary figures (verging on caricatures) are unsurpassed. In an area where there is much too little agreed detail of artists' lives, Sharaku's remains the greatest mystery of them all.

Working at the same time as Kiyonaga and Utamaro was another artist, who restricted his whole artistic life to kabuki actor prints and became, before the Sharaku

21 Eisen
Courtesan c1815/20
oban

comet, their greatest interpreter. Katsukawa Shunsho (print 5; 1729-92) also taught a large number of gifted pupils, notably Katsukawa Shuncho (print 9; worked c1770-1800), who changed loyalties, however, to become Kiyonaga's most talented disciple, and Katsukawa Shunei (print 10; 1768-1819). For the latter, print making was only an incidental occupation, but he remained faithful to the kabuki genre and is credited with inventing the "big head" actor portraits and producing some comparable to those of Sharaku. The artist Shunro was also originally a pupil of Shuncho but later achieved even greater fame than his master under the name of Hokusai.

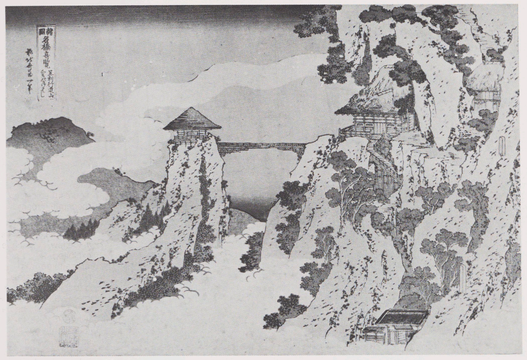
The one major artist available to carry the movement forward into the 19th century was also symptomatic of its ensuing decay. Notorious as a plagiarist, if highly talented as such, and capable early in his career of first class original prints, Utagawa Toyokuni (prints 11 and 12; 1769-1825) had a seemingly limitless facility for copying the style of any of the masters of his time. During the 1790s and the pre-eminence of Utamaro's courtesans he was perhaps the leading artist of the stage. On the death of Utamaro, however, he was left alone on the heights and it appears that he became the slave of the publishers, producing an endless and increasingly tasteless series of kabuki and courtesan prints. The Utagawa school which he led dominated ukiyo-e print making until its final demise. The other leading copyist, in this case primarily of Utamaro, was Kikugawa Eizan (prints 17 and 18; 1787-1867). Eizan was given very little credit as an original artist by the earlier critics, but he was an artist talented in the depiction both of women and of landscape detail. Another artist unable to avoid the general downhill slide but displaying nevertheless the basic qualities of effective print design was Kashosai Shunsen (print 19; worked 1790-1823). The all-blue print (aizurie) of a courtesan is a good example of a type that assumed great popularity from about 1820 onwards when a certain dye known as Prussian blue was introduced into Japan.

The three leading artists of the next 40 years were Utagawa Kunisada (prints 25-27; 1786-1864); Keisai Eisen (prints 21-23; 1790 -1851); and Utagawa Kuniyoshi (prints 29-31; 1797-1861). Eisen and Kuniyoshi were almost as well known for their occasional bursts of wildly dissipated living as for their artistic creations. However, all three showed flashes of that pure talent that had been the norm rather than the exception 50 years before.

Kunisada was the senior pupil of Toyokuni and therefore, in 1844, adopted the name Toyokuni after the death of both his master and the latter's adopted son. Confusion has been caused by Kunisada's signing himself Toyokuni II, thereby ignoring the prior claim of the son, although he (Kunisada) is generally referred to as Toyokuni III. As with Toyokuni himself there is good early work to offset the horrors that followed. It was the Utagawa school under Kunisada that supervised the funeral rites of ukiyo-e print making. The line became straight and sharp and no longer the thing of elegance it had been, the colour unsympathetic and garish, and the figures themselves uninteresting. Kimono pattern detail became in many cases the artist's sole preoccupation.

Eisen was equally guilty of poor taste in the majority of his courtesan prints, but produced a few, too few, landscape prints including the waterfall series exhibited, which are highly regarded. The most talented of the three was probably Kuniyoshi. Not that he didn't create monsters too — after all, they were all reacting to the demands of the same public — but there are some works fit to stand beside the best of the previous century. Kuniyoshi had a military bent which served him well, when in 1842, the government, in an attempt to stamp out "immorality", decreed prints of actors and courtesans illegal and encouraged artists to portray past military glories. Print 31 is from this period and shows Japan's legendary hero par excellence, Yoshitsune Minamoto organising the final

30 Kuniyoshi
Scene from the Chucshingura c1845/50
oban



35 Hokusai
Hanging Cloud Bridge at Gyodosan c1830
oban yokoe

demise of the rival Taira clan during the civil wars of the 12th to 15th centuries. Ichimosai Yoshitora (print 32; worked 1840-1870) was one of Kuniyoshi's best pupils.

The Chushingura (print 30) is Japan's favourite kabuki drama. It is the story of 47 ronin who, in 1701, planned and eventually succeeded in revenging their lord's unjust death at the instigation of a rival, whereupon they all committed seppuku (or harakiri), thus dramatically demonstrating the samurai code of loyalty up to and beyond the grave. The story is a true one; the graves are identifiable in Tokyo to this day.

Landscape art really falls outside the scope of ukiyo-e, given the latter's predisposition with urban stimuli. That the two great artists of the 19th century should principally depict landscapes is less an irony than an inevitable return to classical origins.

Katsushika Hokusai (prints 33-35; 1760-1849) was the more versatile artist, having taught himself over a long lifetime the precepts inherent in virtually all known art schools, including western. His drawing skills, as represented in his sketching handbooks, the Mangwa, are legendary; and the power of his designs from the print series "36 views of Mt Fuji" so well known as to need no further comment. From his piercingly analytical eye came that universal quality to his art which ranks him with the best artists of other cultures and times. But this very quality distances him from the rest of humanity and his rival, Ichiryusai Hiroshige (prints 36-42; 1797-1858), eventually achieved greater popularity in Edo because he exhibited a warmth and relevance to which his fellow citizens could relate. We are fortunate in having a good representation in this exhibition of the latter's work and sufficient of the former's to provide a comparison. Print 37 is from the first series entitled "53 on the Tokaido road" which assumed an importance for Hiroshige comparable to the Mt Fuji series for Hokusai.

Hokusai and Hiroshige were the last flicker of the candle-light by which ukiyo-e prints illuminated Japanese urban society for almost two centuries. It is doubtful if there was ever a truer expression of a people's art nor one which could, even on its deathbed, have provided such a direct stimulus to our own.

NICK SHORT
— Guest Curator

Table of prints

Artist	Subject	Approximate date of print	Print Format
Primitive period 1721-1760			
1 Nishikawa Sukenobu 1674 -1760	Genre	1720	book illustration
2 Okumura Masonobu 1685-1764	Kabuki (theatre)	1740	hosoban
3 Okumura Toshinobu worked 1720-1750	Kabuki	1740	hosoban
4 Torii Kiyotsune 1735-1785	Kabuki	1755	hosoban
Classical period 1760-1800			
5 Katsukawa Shunsho 1729 -1792	Bijin (beautiful women)	1770	koban
6 Isoda Koryusai worked 1760 -1780	Bijin	1775	chuban
7 Isoda Koryusai	Bijin	1780	hashira
8 Torii Kiyonaga 1752 -1815	Bijin	1780	chuban
9 Katsukawa Shuncho worked 1770 -1800	Bijin	1785/90	chuban
10 Katsukawa Shunei 1768 -1819	Kabuki	1785/90	chuban
11 Utagawa Toyokuni 1769 -1825	Bijin	1785/90	hashira
12 Utagawa Toyokuni	Bijin	1790	oban
13 Chobunsai Eishi worked 1780 -1800	Bijin	1790	chuban
14 Chobunsai Eishi	Bijin	1795	oban
15 Kitagawa Utamaro 1753 -1806	Bijin	1795	oban
16 Kitagawa Utamaro	Bijin	1795/1800	oban
Decadent period 1800-1860			
17 Kikugawa Eizan 1787 -1867	Bijin	1810	oban
18 Kikugawa Eizan	Bijin	1810/15	oban yokoe
19 Kashosai Shunsen worked 1790 -1823	Bijin	1815/20	oban
20 Torii Kiyomine 1786 -1868	Bijin	1815/20	oban
21 Keisai Eisen 1789 -1851	Bijin	1815/20	oban
22 Keisai Eisen	Bijin	1845	oban
23 Keisai Eisen	Landscape	1845	oban
24 Totoya Hokkei 1780 -1850	Legend	1815/35	surimono

Artist	Subject	Approximate date of print	Print Size
25 Utagawa Kunisada 1786 -1864	Bijin	1820/50	surimono
26 Utagawa Kunisada	Sumo (wrestler)	1850	oban triptych
27 Utagawa Kunisada	Kabuki	1861	oban
28 Baichoro Kunisada (II) 1823 -1880	Legend	1857	oban
29 Utagawa Kuniyoshi 1797 -1861	Legend	1845/50	oban
30 Utagawa Kuniyoshi	Kabuki	1845/50	oban
31 Utagawa Kuniyoshi	Legend	1850	oban triptych
32 Ichimosai Yoshitora worked 1840 -1870	Legend	1850	oban triptych
Artist	**Series**	**Approximate date of print**	**Print Format**
Landscape 1825-1860			
33 Katsushika Hokusai 1760-1849	36 Views of Mt Fuji	1825/28	oban yokoe
34 Katsushika Hokusai	36 Views of Mt Fuji	1825/28	oban yokoe
35 Katsushika Hokusai	Views of Famous Bridges	1830	oban yokoe
36 Ichiryusai Hiroshige 1797 -1858	Kyoto Meisho	1834	oban yokoe
37 Ichiryusai Hiroshige	Hoeido Tokaido	1835	oban yokoe
38 Ichiryusai Hiroshige	Settsu Gekka	1842	kakemono
39 Ichiryusai Hiroshige	Kachoe (nature)	1853	tanzaku
40 Ichiryusai Hiroshige	100 Views of Edo	1857	oban
41 Ichiryusai Hiroshige	36 Views of Mt Fuji	1858	oban
42 Ivhiryusai Hiroshige	36 Views of Mt Fuji	1858	oban
43 Ichiryusai Hiroshige (II)	100 Views of Edo	1859	oban

Note: The dating of Japanese prints of the period covered by this exhibition is fraught with enormous difficulties. Most catalogues avoid doing so, but because this is a chronological exposition an attempt has been made. Authorities in English are rare (at least as to detail) and frequently contradictory. Even those Japanese texts which have been translated do not always agree. Hence accuracy to within a five year period can be regarded as a minor triumph.

Key to print formats

Chuban — vertical (c280 x 200 mm)
Oban — vertical (c380 x 250 mm)
Oban Yokoe — horizontal (c380 x 250 mm)
Surimono — vertical (c200 x 180 mm)
Hashira — vertical (c690 x 130 mm)
Tanzaku — vertical (c380 x 130 mm, or less)
Kakemono — vertical (c760 x 250 mm)
Hosoe — vertical (c300 x 150 mm)
Koban — vertical (c230 x 180 mm)