IMAGES OF WOMEN IN JAPANESE PRINTS

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JOE AND EMILY LOWE ART GALLERY
SIMS HALL, SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY
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"Images of Women in Japanese Prints" was conceived and organized as the major part of my graduate internship at Joe and Emily Lowe Art Gallery. Selection of subject matter, research on the works, exhibition design, and preparation of this catalogue have been my responsibility. However, I wish to emphasize that no exhibition is the work of just one person. It is a cooperative adventure enjoyed by many; a many-sided result of input from a variety of interested individuals.

The exhibition would not have been possible without the guidance, encouragement and criticism given me by Stanton L. Catlin, Director of Exhibitions, and Mary Takah, Associate Curator, both of Joe and Emily Lowe Art Gallery, as well as the enthusiastic cooperation of the Syracuse University Art Collection. I also wish to express my appreciation to the following people for their generous assistance in the preparation of the exhibition: Mary Ann Cato, Registrar, Syracuse University Art Collection; Charles R. Dibble, Assistant Dean for Students, College of Visual and Performing Arts; Elizabeth C. Evans, Assistant Curator, Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University; Glenda Larson; Ann Loveday; Sherry Nordstrom, Syracuse University News Bureau; Kazuhira Okumoto; Stanley Olkowski; Debora Delap Palmer, Acting Registrar, Syracuse University Art Collection; and John Vecchio.

S. Gall Fuller
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Images of Women in Japanese Prints

It would be difficult, within the scope of this catalogue, to discuss in detail the history and technique of the ukiyo-e ("picture of the floating world"). This essay is intended chiefly as a brief survey of the subject matter, principles and technical processes of the unique art of printmaking which is represented in the exhibition.

Among the artists of the color woodblock print, the Japanese may be called the masters. Their art evolved from simple black ink prints from line drawings in the 17th century (such as works by Hishikawa Moronobu) into multi-color productions in the 18th century. And in the history of Japanese printmaking, the period of the ukiyo-e (mid-17th to late 19th century) is considered to be one of the finest. The artist of that period utilized a variety of subject matter, including actors of the Kabuki stage, legendary heroes, landscape, fantastic monsters, children, sumo wrestlers, erotic scenes, fish, birds, flowers and historical events. But no subject was more popular in these prints than the portrayal of women. It was one of the first subjects of the ukiyo-e and which, by the late 18th century, became highly stylized.

Women were depicted in many ways: the ordinary women of the village of Edo (present-day Tokyo), courtiers of the Yoshiwara district, geisha, tea-house waitresses, popular shop assistants, peasants and nameless young women of beauty. They were often pictured in male roles such as poet, farmer, artisan, legendary hero, businessman and printer. In Japan, women received the same overall degree of education as the men which, in general, was not very high. In addition, girls learned the skills of sewing and cooking and farmers' daughters learned the basic skills of farming. These everyday activities were important subjects of the ukiyo-e artists, who often depicted women grooming (print 16), reading (19), writing (18), smoking (12), daydreaming (11), printmaking, cleaning house, love-making, arranging flowers, bathing and tending children.

During the Edo period (1613-1867), life in Japan centered around Edo. At that point in Japanese history, the government allowed
a degree of decadence designed to keep people happy. The nation had just emerged from a series of civil wars, and the government was content for the people to be preoccupied with somewhat hedonistic pursuits. That is why the pleasure districts—such as Yoshiwara and Shinagawa—were allowed to exist, not because the Japanese had complete freedom, for they certainly did not.

The Yoshiwara district of Edo existed from 1656 to 1957 and was a great source of subject matter for ukiyo-e artists. This district contained restaurants, tea-houses, theatres and brothels within a walled-off section of streets, and was where the men of the merchant class spent much of their time and money. It should be mentioned here that women accepted as natural the outside sexual activities of the men, though it meant a double standard. Decent family women empathized with the prostitutes of the pleasure districts who were, in all probability, working to keep their families out of debt. When a man desired the attentions of a particular courtesan, he was required to wait for her in a tea-house where he was amused by entertainers—geisha—who played musical instruments, sang, danced and carried on witty conversations. The geisha were not prostitutes, but licensed entertainers.

Geisha and courtesans were frequently depicted in prints of the ukiyo-e period. They may be difficult to differentiate at times, but there are usually several clues to help the viewer. For example, geisha were invariably shown with their customary heavy white makeup and were not permitted to wear hair ornamentation as elaborate as that of the courtesans. Also, after 1741 a geisha always tied the obi in back (print 5), whereas a courtesan tied it in front (2). The courtesans were drawn as portraits, as were also prints of actors, but the geisha were presented not as individuals but as a certain type of woman.

Prints of beautiful women emphasized the faces, hair, and clothing. In this area, Utamaro developed the close-up portrait (print 18) and the use of the half-figure (16) especially to call attention to the hair and face. He also popularized the use of powdered mica backgrounds (16 and 19) to draw even more attention to the face of the subject. It is interesting to note that there are usually no clues as to the age of the female shown, although on occasion it is possible to determine age from the details of the way in which the clothes are worn. For example, young girls are often shown with very long kimono sleeves.

As for the type of woman preferred by men during the height of the ukiyo-e, we gain considerable insight from Chie Hirano, who wrote "Information gleaned from contemporary writers tells us that men appreciated slender figures of medium height, rather than such tall, well-developed bodies as those represented by Kyonaga [print 4 and 5],—types which they regarded as fitting only for ladies-in-waiting, who should have an imposing appearance." Other critics, however, feel that Kyonaga's women are the ultimate in female beauty of the time. Chie Hirano also said that men "preferred dainty and amorous women for their companions, and the type depicted by Utamaro [17]... was more nearly their ideal." Indeed, Utamaro is considered by many scholars to have been the master of depicting beautiful women in the ukiyo-e period.

The combined characteristics of ukiyo-e are perhaps the greatest barrier to appreciation by the western eye. Two-dimensional western art attempts to create an illusion of depth, whereas the ukiyo-e print aspires to be nothing more than what it is: literally, a flat piece of paper on which a picture has been created. Almost always the usage of this flat space is compositionally perfect, a feature which was derived from the classical painting of China. Another feature inherited from Chinese painting was the Asian view of perspective, which usually appears to be the reverse of western perspective; in these prints, lines converge toward the viewer, rather than away from him. The perspective of Chinese painting is simple to understand: the objects presented at the very bottom of the picture are to be read as closest to the viewer and the objects at the top as furthest in distance. The same rule applies to many prints of the ukiyo-e period (print 3 and 7), certainly not as the result of artistic innocence, inasmuch as most Japanese artists after about 1760 had been introduced to western perspective. Rather, it was a matter of preference: ukiyo-e artists depicted precisely what they wanted to depict.
The artists generally preferred flat colors, distributed within outlines to the advantage of the two-dimensional design. In addition, the artist usually achieved a characteristic harmony with his colors (print 3), so that the prints were even more desirable to the restless Edo bourgeoisie. The lines of ukiyo-e prints are pure and flowing, probably a derivation of the traditional emphasis on the art of handwriting, for when a Japanese expresses an idea, writing and painting are interchangeable. The written character, singly or in combination, is just as inventive, just as personal, just as much of an aesthetic statement as a painting of the idea by the same hand. This is often difficult for the Western mind to comprehend.

Another major characteristic of ukiyo-e is story-telling, whether it is a legend, a scene of the pleasure district, an illustration of an historical event, the everyday activities of an average person, or a theatre scene. This story-telling often focused on famous lovers (print 14) as popular in Japan as the story of Romeo and Juliet in the West. The artists consciously appealed to the emotions of the viewer by employing an extensive iconography in the works themselves; symbols often suggested entire moral stories and legends, and prints of these stories almost always presented someone in a dramatic pose.

Although credit for the most exquisite ukiyo-e prints is given to the artist, such an attribution is not entirely correct. The creation of a print was a commercial venture, the result of the efforts of several people: the artist, the engraver, the printer, and the publisher. The publisher was deeply involved in the conception of ideas, use of color and level of taste in the works of his artists. He was a key figure in their success, and he in return relied on them for his living.

Japanese artists at that time worked in black ink on white paper. The artist would take a rough, black-ink drawing to the shop of a publisher where, if it were approved for publication, the artist would make a second drawing of the same design with black ink on very thin paper. With a mixture of rice paste and alum, the engraver glued the drawing facedown onto a block of wood (preferably cherry), then cut out all the wood around the lines. This "key block" printed the black lines of the drawing in a purified version, for the original drawings were often quite crude. About twenty of these were printed in black and white. The artist would then indicate on each sheet the color of ink which was to be used. The engraver cut one block for each color from these color keys, and it is obvious that the delicacy or crudeness of the linear quality of the print depended upon the skill of the engraver. The most skillful Japanese engravers put their European counterparts of the day to shame. The printer then produced the finished prints from the engraved blocks. He could select from up to twenty colors, coming as close to the artist's indications as possible. The pigments were mixed with rice paste directly on the block to be printed, then the wet paper was applied and rubbed hard and long with a baren. The standard number of prints from one set of blocks was two hundred, after which the blocks were noticeably worn.

The paper used for the prints is a joy in itself. Made of mulberry plant fibers, it resists tearing, holds ink tenaciously, has a lovely lustrous appearance and seems to have a life of its own. The amazing properties of this paper make it possible to wash the print by soaking it in warm water, thereby removing most of the soilage and also any glue applied by negligent collectors. However, this is a process recommended only for collectors who know precisely what they are doing and should never be attempted on the later prints containing German aniline dye, as it will run.

Discussion of the production methods of the prints is important in a study of ukiyo-e because it serves to point out the commercial aspect of the prints. For the people of Edo who purchased them, the major attraction of these prints was their preoccupation with the portrayal of what was fashionable in that city from one day to the next: clothing, hair styles, leading actors, notorious lovers, favorite courtesans and, in the middle of the 19th century, prints depicting places of interest. And of these commercially-oriented subjects, women played a major role, very nearly becoming the single trademark of the ukiyo-e.

But the Japanese at that time viewed the prints in much the same way as we view postcards. They were souvenirs to be kept in an album or in a drawer, but certainly not as art for their walls. And it is
true that to this day, the majority of Japanese feel that way. But we are capable of viewing them in a different light. The images of women we see in the prints are mysteriously appealing, even for viewers who are centuries and miles distant from the culture which produced them.

Notes

1. Suzuki Harunobu (print 3) is known to have used up to fifteen color blocks in one print.
3. Chie Hirano, pp. 92-93.
5. Trade with the Dutch exposed Japanese artists to the art of Europe, including first-hand studies of the copper plates used by the Dutch for engraving. Later ukiyo-e artists, in particular Katsushika Hokusai and Ando Hiroshige, developed a blend of Asian and European perspective in their landscapes.
8. This imported dye came into use in the late 19th century, and can usually be spotted by its garish appearance (print 20).
3 The Evening Bell of the Clock (Tokei no Banshō).
From the series "Eight Interior Scenes", c. 1766.

Chuban. Sheet size: 11 5/16 x 8 5/16". Image size: 10 13/16 x 8 5/16".
Signature: Kyosen. Seal: Kyosen no in.*
Reproduced: Jack Hillier, Suzuki Harunobu (Philadelphia: The
Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1970), plate 33; Jack Hillier,
17; Sadako Kikuchi, A Treasury of Japanese Wood Block Prints
(New York: Crown Publishers Inc., 1969), plate 19; Seitchiro
Takahashi, Masterworks of Ukiyo-e: Harunobu (Tokyo and Palo
Alto, California: Kodansha International Ltd., 1968), plate
20; Seitchiro Takahashi, Traditional Woodblock Prints of
Japan (New York and Tokyo: Weatherhill/HetBonsa, 1972),
plate 68.

* Kyosen, a poet and samurai, was the leader of a literary club
(Kyosen Renjū) which commissioned calendar prints. Because
the government regulated the publication of calendars, it was regarded
as a challenge to these literary clubs to produce and distribute
calendars privately, with concealed markings. Kyosen's signature
and seal on this print indicates that he suggested the idea for the
print, but the print design itself was executed by Harunobu. The
presence of his signature and seal also indicates that this calen-
dar print is an early and fine state. The later versions, in which
Harunobu's signature has been added and Kyosen's name and the calen-
dar markings removed, have been altered in color and have lost much
of their appeal.

TORII KIYONAGA (1752-1815)

School: Torii
Teacher: Torii Kiyomitsu
Influenced by: Harunobu, Koryusai, Shunsho
Pupils: his son Kiyomasa, and many artists with names beginning
with Kiy-
Influenced: Eishi, Shuncho, Shunman, Toyokuni, Utamaro

4 Seeing Off at Night (The Seventh Month). From the series
"The Twelve Months in the South" (Minami Jōni kō), 1784.

This print is the left half of a diptych.

Oban. Sheet size: 15 3/16 x 10 3/16". Image size: 15 x 10".
Signature: Kiyonaga ga
Reproduced: Muneshige Narazaki, Masterworks of Ukiyo-e: Kiyonaga

5 Summer Evening by the River at Hamachō. 1784.
This print is the right half of a diptych.

Oban. Sheet size: 15 7/16 x 10 5/16". Image size: 15 1/4 x
9 7/8".
Signature: Kiyonaga ga
Reproduced: Muneshige Narazaki, Masterworks of Ukiyo-e: Kiyonaga
(Tokyo and Palo Alto, California: Kodansha International Ltd.,
1969), plate 72.

ICHYOSAI KUNISADA (1786-1865)

Also known as Toyokuni III.
School: Utagawa
Teacher: Utagawa Toyokuni

6 Overcoming Robbers.

Oban. Sheet size: 14 x 9 1/2". Image size: 13 9/16 x 9".
Signature: Toyokuni ga
Censor: Aratame (December 1853-1857 inclusive)

7 Children at Play.

Oban. Sheet size: 14 11/16 x 10". Image size: 14 1/2 x 10".
Signature: Toyokuni ga
Publisher: Yamaguchi-ya Tobei
Censor: Goat 5, aratame (1859)

8 Festival Scene.
Triptych of oban. Overall size: 15 1/16 x 32 1/8".
Signature: Toyokuni ga
Publisher: Maruya Jimpachi (Yenjudō), of Tōriaburacho
9) **Doll House.**
Triptych of oban. Overall size: 14 7/8 x 30".
Signature: Kochoro Toyokuni ga
Artist seal: Toshidama
Publisher: Tsutaya Kichiō (Kōyedō), of Nandemmarō-chō
Censors: Mera Ta-ichirō and Murata Hieyemon (in combination, c. 1847-50)

**UTAGAWA KUNIYOSHI** (1797-1861)

School: Utagawa
Teacher: Utagawa Toyokuni
Pupils: Yoshitaka, Yoshitoshi and many artists with names beginning with Yoshi-

10) **Famous Woman Robber.** c. 1850.
Oban. Sheet size: 14 3/4 x 10 1/16". Image size: 14 1/2 x 9 15/16".
Signature: Ichiyusai Kuniyoshi ga
Artist seal: Paulownia crest
Publisher: Yenshō-ya Hikobē of Nihombashi
Censors: Murata Hieyemon and Kinugasa Fusajirō (in combination, 1851-53)

11) **Snowy Morning.** From the series "Snow, Moon and Flowers" (Satsukimatsubana no uchi), c. 1846.
Oban. Sheet size: 14 3/4 x 10". Image size: 14 1/2 x 10".
Signature: Ichiyusai Kuniyoshi ga
Artist seal: Paulownia crest
Publisher: Iba-ya Sensaburō (Dansendō), of Horiye-chō
Censor: Yoshimura Gentarō (c. 1843-46)

12) **Woman Smoking a Pipe.** From the series "Incidents of Everyday Life for the Eight Views and Eight Trigrams (women)" (Ningen banji a-fu-mi hakkei), c. 1849.
Oban. Sheet size: 14 3/4 x 10 1/8". Image size: 14 5/8 x 10 1/8".
Signature: Ichiyusai Kuniyoshi Ki-ga
Artist seal: Paulownia crest
Publisher: Yamaguchī-ya Tobēi
Censors: Yoshimura Gentarō (c. 1843-46) and Muramatsu

13) **KATSUKAWA SHUNCHO** (active 1772-1800)
School: Katsukawa
Teacher: Katsukawa Shunshō
Influenced by: Kiyonaga

14) **Beautiful Woman.**
Oban. Sheet size: 15 1/2 x 10 3/8". Image size: 15 1/4 x 10 1/8".
Signature: Shuncho ga
Publisher: Tsuruya Kiemon of Kyoto

15) **The Lovers Umegawa and Chōbei.** From the series "The Famous Eight Views of Omì" (Omì Hakkei), c. 1797.
Oban. Sheet size: 15 3/4 x 10 1/2" (irregular). Image size: 14 x 9 3/4".
Signature: Utamaro hitsu
Publisher: Takatsuya Isuke

16) **Beauty.** From the series "Eight Scenes at Famous Teashops", c. 1790.
Oban. Sheet size: 15 7/8 x 10 3/4". Image size: 14 3/4 x 10".
Signature: Utamaro hitsu

17) **Girl Dressing a Companion's Hair.** From the series "Twelve Forms of Women's Handwork" (Fujin towa zuwa junī kō), c. 1795-1800.
Oban with mica. Sheet size: 16 x 10 3/4". Image size: 14 11/16 x
17 Two Women. c. 1800.
Oban. Sheet size: 16 x 10 3/4". Image size: 14 7/8 x 10 1/16".
Signature: Utamaro hitsu
Publisher: Tsuruya Kiemon of Kyôto

18 The Courtesan Hanagoi of the Ogi-ya Brothel. From the series "Renowned Beauties From the Six Best Houses" (Komei Bijin Rokkasen), c. 1800.
Oban. Sheet size: 15 3/4 x 10 1/2". Image size: 15 1/8 x 10 5/16".
Signature: Utamaro hitsu
Publisher: Oniya Kenkura

19 Woman Reading.
Oban with mica. Sheet size: 16 x 10 1/4". Image size: 16 x 10 1/4".
Signature: Utamaro ga

TAISO YOSHITOSHI (1839-1892)
School: Utagawa
Teacher: Utagawa Kuniyoshi
Influenced by: Utamaro
Pupils: Yoshihide and many artists with names beginning with Toshi-

20 Old Woman. From the series "The Hundred Moons" (Tsuki hyakushi), c. 1886.


