

*Kunisada's Twelve Month Series*, October 10, 2008-February 1, 2009

"Twelve Months," this beautiful set of triptychs by the 19th-century Japanese printmaker Utagawa Kunisada (1786–1865), depicts genre scenes, or scenes of everyday life, in the Edo period (1603–1867). The Edo period (named for the town that is now modern Tokyo) was ushered in by the consolidation of the Tokugawa shogun's power, which introduced a prolonged period of peace. With the patronage and support of a new class of well-to-do town dwellers (called *chōnin* in Japanese), commerce, the arts, crafts, kabuki theater, and entertainment offered by the teahouses and courtesans of the licensed pleasure quarters flourished, contributing to the development of a distinctive new urban culture.

Japanese prints illustrating genre subjects evolved, at least in part, from an earlier tradition of painting festival and city scenes. Screen paintings of festivals, associated with the seasons, seasonal activities, and specific monthly celebrations, are reminders of time's passing and of the annual cycle of the calendar. In the 16th century, screen paintings of panoramic city views became popular, their details showing scenes of daily activities. Kunisada's prints draw their inspiration from these early genre depictions.

Seasonal activities, most performed by women, are Kunisada's primary subjects. He alternates between mundane pursuits, such as the airing of clothes (*The Sixth Month*), with the preparation of rice cakes (*mochi*) for the New Year's holiday (*The Twelfth Month*), contrasting the cycle of daily life (*ke*) with the extraordinary (*hare*) quality of religious festival days (*harebi*), and highlighting the passage of time.

The subject of the twelve months was first introduced into the Japanese print repertory in the 18th century by Okumura Masanobu (1686–1764), a highly innovative Japanese printmaker. In contrast to mainstream depictions of kabuki actors and courtesans boldly framed against a simple ground, this new type of work encompassed scenery as well. A century later, Kunisada carried on the seasonal theme, but expanded the traditional triptych format, which featured one figure per panel, by adding additional figures to some panels and by overlapping foreground and background details between panels. Whether set within elaborate domestic interiors or a landscape environment, Kunisada's monumental compositions are often more unified and dynamic than those of his predecessors.

Note: Until 1873 the Japanese used a lunar calendar, in which the rotation of the seasons began with spring. The New Year, which marked the first day of spring, usually occurred in late January or early to mid-February in our solar Gregorian calendar.

## CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Yamamoto Shōun, Japanese, 1870-1965

Matsuki Heikichi, Japanese

*Views of the Four Seasons*, 1906

Ink, colors, metallic embellishments, gofun, and embossing on paper

Elizabeth T. and Dorothy N. Casey Fund 2006.102

This album page, which postdates Kunisada's print series, illustrates how scenes of the four seasons and seasonal activities were represented in the Meiji period (1868 – 1912).



Utagawa Kunisada, Japanese, 1786-1865

Kichizō Tsutaya, Japanese

Yokogawa Takejiro, 19th century

*The Eleventh Month: The Cock's Fair (Shimotsuki: Tori no machi)*, 1854

Polychrome woodblock triptych

Gift of Marshall H. Gould 30.039.1

In this scene, three warmly clad women make their way to the Washi Great Shrine in Asakusa, near the Yoshiwara pleasure district, seen in the distance. They carry offerings for the Shintō deity Okunimushi no Mikoto, whose festival falls on the first "cock" day of the eleventh month. (The Japanese associate days of the month with the twelve animals of the zodiac.) The woman on the right carries a rake decorated with a mask of a smiling peasant woman, Otafuku, who is associated with prosperity. Such rakes would be used during the celebration of the New Year to come.



Utagawa Kunisada, Japanese, 1786-1865

Kichizō Tsutaya, Japanese

*[The Second Month] Seasonal Change of Clothes: Plum Viewing (Koromogae umemi)*, 1854

Polychrome woodblock triptych

Gift of Marshall H. Gould 30.039.10

Flowering plum is usually associated with the first month of the year, but here Kunisada forgoes depicting the "seasonal change of clothes" described in the month's old literary title and instead chooses to illustrate plum for the second lunar month. Here a group of women picnic in a garden surrounded by beautiful flowering plum trees.



# RISD MUSEUM

Utagawa Kunisada, Japanese, 1786-1865  
Kichizō Tsutaya, Japanese  
Yokogawa Takejiro, 19th century  
*The third month: The Doll Festival (Yayoi: Hina matsuri)*, 1854  
Polychrome woodblock print  
Gift of Marshall H. Gould 30.039.11



The Doll Festival, which celebrated the young girls of the household, took place on the third day of the third month, when the flowering peach trees (*momo*) are in bloom. The customary display of dolls and other miniature objects is suggested on the left, where a corner of a tiny palanquin (an enclosed conveyance on poles supported by bearers and used to transport a seated person) supports a tiered arrangement of dolls representing the imperial court.

Utagawa Kunisada, Japanese, 1786-1865  
Kichizō Tsutaya, Japanese  
*The First Month: First Dance of the New Year (Moshun: Odorizome)*, 1854  
Polychrome woodblock triptych  
Gift of Marshall H. Gould 30.039.12



A performance by two dancers and a Japanese lute (*shamisen*) player marks the arrival of the lunar New Year. Pine trees, which appear in the background, are traditional New Year's decorations.

Utagawa Kunisada, Japanese, 1786-1865  
Kichizō Tsutaya, Japanese  
Yokogawa Takejiro, 19th century  
*The tenth month (Indian summer): First snow (Koharu: hatsuyuki)*, 1854  
Polychrome woodblock print  
Gift of Marshall H. Gould 30.039.2



“Koharu,” the Japanese name for this month, is the equivalent to our “Indian summer.” But Kunisada has chosen to depict the first snow rather than a more typical autumn scene. The woman on the left is selling fried potatoes (*yakiimo*) near the Sumida River, which runs through Edo (modern Tokyo).

# RISD MUSEUM

Utagawa Kunisada, Japanese, 1786-1865

Kichizō Tsutaya, Japanese

*The Fourth Month: The first cuckoo (Uzuki: Hatsu hototogisu)*, 1854

Polychrome woodblock print

Gift of Marshall H. Gould 30.039.3



In this busy kitchen scene, the well-dressed woman at left watches one servant preparing a bonito fish while the second, on the far right, pours sake from a cask into a container. A cuckoo, visible through the window on the left, refers to the time of year: its appearance is a sign that the rainy season is about to begin and the rice should be planted.

Utagawa Kunisada, Japanese, 1786-1865

Kichizō Tsutaya, Japanese

*The Ninth Month: Chrysanthemum (?; character illegible) Party in the Ninth Month (Choyo: Kiku (?) no tsuki utage)*, 1854

Polychrome woodblock triptych

Gift of Marshall H. Gould 30.039.4



The ninth day of the ninth month brings the Chrysanthemum Festival. As a celebration is prepared, performers with nearly life-size bunraku theater puppets arrive to provide entertainment while traditional narratives are chanted to the accompaniment of a three-stringed Japanese lute (*shamisen*). The maple leaves in the background are a seasonal reference to autumn.

Utagawa Kunisada, Japanese, 1786-1865

Kichizō Tsutaya, Japanese

*The Twelfth Month: Making Mochi Cakes (Shiwasu: Mochitsuki)*, 1854

Polychrome woodblock triptych

Gift of Marshall H. Gould 30.039.5



In this final month of the winter season, preparations for the New Year festivities are underway as five women and a man make rice cakes (*mochi*) in the kitchen. Auspicious symbols of the coming year appear as small details: the turtle of long life is depicted on the fan of the woman on the left, and gourds, a symbol of good luck, are visible on the sliding screens behind her.

The publisher has included his mark on the lantern on the right as a form of self-advertisement. Similar lanterns appear in the print for *The Seventh Month*.

# RISD MUSEUM

Utagawa Kunisada, Japanese, 1786-1865

Kichizō Tsutaya, Japanese

Yokogawa Takejiro, 19th century

*The Seventh Month: Waiting for the Moon (Fumizuki: Nijurokuya machi)*, 1854

Three-paneled polychrome woodblock print

Gift of Marshall H. Gould 30.039.6



Three elaborately dressed women dine on crabs and drink sake while they wait for the moon to appear over Shinagawa Bay in Edo (modern Tokyo) on the twenty-sixth day of the seventh month. On this night, it was believed that the Buddha Amida would appear with two bodhisattva attendants, Kannon and Seishi.

The publisher has included his mark on the lanterns on this veranda as a form of self-advertisement. It appears again on a single lantern in the print for *The Twelfth Month*.

Utagawa Kunisada, Japanese, 1786-1865

Kichizō Tsutaya, Japanese

Yokogawa Takejiro, 19th century

*The Fifth Month: The Ikebana Gathering (Satsuki: Ikebana no kai)*, *The Twelve Months (Junikagetsu no uchi)*, 1854

Polychrome woodblock triptych

Gift of Marshall H. Gould 30.039.7



The flower arrangements (*ikebana*) in this print all focus on irises, which bloom in the fifth month. The Boy's Festival, celebrated on the fifth day of the month, was associated with a particular type of iris known as *shōbu*.

Utagawa Kunisada, Japanese, 1786-1865

Kichizō Tsutaya, Japanese

Yokogawa Takejiro, 19th century

*The sixth month: Summer airing of clothes (Minazuki: doyoboshi)*, 1854

Polychrome woodblock print

Gift of Marshall H. Gould 30.039.8



Minazuki, the Japanese name for this month — the last of summer — refers to its lack of water. The woman with the loosened robe fanning herself at the center of the composition and the bowl of watermelon set before her both allude to the season's heat. The

# RISD MUSEUM

cuckoo on her fan is familiar from the print for *The Fourth Month*, where it announced the arrival of summer. The servant at left is airing kimono, a seasonal activity.

Utagawa Kunisada, Japanese, 1786-1865

Kichizō Tsutaya, Japanese

Yokogawa Takejiro, 19th century

*The Eighth Month: Moon Viewing on the Fifteenth Night (Hatsuki: Tsukimi)*, 1854

Three-paneled polychrome woodblock print

Gift of Marshall H. Gould 30.039.9



Moon viewing was especially appropriate for the fifteenth day of the eighth month when, in the lunar calendar, the moon would be full. Here, women walk delicately through a garden filled with the seven grasses of autumn, a symbol of the season.

Japanese; Edo

*Miniature palanquin*, probably 1800s

Exterior: Laquered wood with painted-gilt design and gilt-metal (probably brass) ornaments; Interior: paintings in ink, colors, and gold on paper

Gift of Marshall H. Gould 43.509

This miniature palanquin (an enclosed conveyance on poles supported by bearers and used to transport a seated person) would have been displayed during the Doll Festival, which was dedicated to the young girls of the household, who often received sets of dolls and miniature furnishings of this type at birth or on their first birthday. A similar object is visible in Kunisada's triptych for *The Third Month*, displayed on the wall nearby.