

Striking Chords: Music in Ukiyo-E Prints, February 5, 2022-July 31, 2022

The music that permeated Japanese society during the Edo period (1615–1868) is vividly captured in *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints. *Ukiyo-e*, which means “pictures of the floating world,” depicted townspeople engaged in a range of leisurely pursuits, where music and other pleasures of the senses were prevalent themes. A time of economic prosperity and flourishing cultural arts, the Edo period is defined as the 253 years the Tokugawa shogunate governed from the city of Edo, now known as Tokyo.

Music heralded festivities and good fortune, pervading images produced for celebrations. Prints of Benzaiten, the goddess of music and wealth, and of children with instruments foretold happiness. Portrayals of professional entertainers playing music or performing, popular among *ukiyo-e* enthusiasts, stirred the imagination and delighted audiences with dazzling displays of the latest fashions. Compositions invoking literary or historical tales often featured musical scenes that combined song and dance. Travel too was accompanied by the strains of itinerant blind musicians, as glimpsed through some of the prints in this exhibition.

These selections were curated by students in the RISD class *Ukiyo-e Prints* (THAD-H791-01, Fall 2021). To watch performances using instruments depicted in the prints, visit the QR codes provided on the object labels.

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CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Made in Japan, Edo period (1615–1868)
The Seven Gods of Good Fortune, 1800s
Polychrome woodblock-printed page from a picture book
24.8 x 35.6 cm (9 3/4 x 14 inches)
Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 20.1333

Depicted here are the seven gods of good fortune, a popular group of mythical figures with diverse origins. Gathered in a circle around two symbols of longevity—a dancing crane and a turtle—the gods are identifiable by the items they carry. From right to left are Bishamonten with his pagoda and a trident, Benzaiten with her lute, Fukurokuju with his fan, Jurōjin with his wish-granting scepter and a stag, Daikokuten with a rice bale and a magic mallet, Ebisu with a



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catch of sea bream, and Hotei with his bag of treasures. The gods appear to be making merry and enjoying Benzaiten's heavenly tunes.

Attributed to Kitao Shigemasa, Japanese, 1739-1820
Child as Benzaiten Playing a Toy Zither, 1780s
Polychrome woodblock print
Vertical ōban: 38.6 x 26.4 cm (15 3/16 x 10 3/8 inches)
Bequest of Isaac C. Bates 13.1368

A seated girl, garbed in a robe patterned with chrysanthemums, strums a seven-string koto. The child represents the goddess Benzaiten, deity of music and happiness. Benzaiten is commonly portrayed with a lute, as seen in the print at left, but here the goddess-girl is charmingly shown with a toy version of a traditional Japanese zither, a musical instrument that was highly popular during the Edo period. The print is from an untitled series that playfully depicted children as the deities of good fortune.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Yb0jJ5kilQ>

Torii Kiyonaga, Japanese, 1752-1815
New Year, from the series Children Games of the Five Festivals (Kodakara gosetsu asobi), ca. 1794
Polychrome woodblock print
Vertical ōban: 37.8 x 25.2 cm (14 7/8 x 9 15/16 inches)
Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 20.1122

Five children celebrate the new year in their finery, surrounded by seasonal adornments that promise abundance, prosperity, and longevity. Enacting the Manzai, a traditional performance to welcome in the New Year, one boy plays the hand drum and the other dances with a fan under a stretched rope (*shimenawa*) that holds tufts of straws, paper streamers, and fern fronds. Children in the foreground enjoy traditional new-year toys—a kite, a battledore and shuttlecock, and a handball (*temari*). On the right, a festive display featuring a miniature pine tree, a lobster, and piles of mandarin oranges adds to the ambience and symbolism of this observance.



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Kōitsu, active in Osaka, Japan; 1818–1831

Woman with a Moon Lute, 1827 - 1828

Polychrome woodblock print with embossing and metallic pigments

Shikishiban: 21.3 x 18.9 cm (8 3/8 x 7 7/16 inches)

Gift of George Pierce Metcalf 56.039.83

In this delicately embossed and sumptuously embellished print, a seated woman cradles a moon lute (*gekkin*), her tasseled pick beside her. Such deluxe prints, known as *surimono*, were privately commissioned, and often sponsored by poetry groups. In this work, the nested-crane pattern repeated on the woman's sash (*obi*) depicts the emblem of the Crane poetry group (Tsuru-gawa) led by Osaka poet Tsurunoya Osamaru (ca. 1751–1839). The three inscribed poems allude to songs accompanied by the moon lute, further revealing how text and image work together in these sophisticated prints.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J7TcBMw98Fc>



Utagawa Hiroshige, Japanese, 1797-1858

Good-Natured (Otonashiki), from the series *Money Trees for Virtuous Women (Fukutoku kane no naru ki)*, 1847-1852

Polychrome woodblock print

Vertical ōban: 36.7 x 24.8 cm (14 7/16 x 9 3/4 inches)

Gift of Mr. Curtis B. Brooks 48.349

A picture of serenity, a seated young woman contemplates her 13-stringed zither (*koto*) as she prepares to play. Her expression embodies the title of the print, *Otonashiki*, which can be translated as good-natured, calm, and quiet.

The series title, *Money Trees for Virtuous Women*, is cleverly visualized by the flowering tree in the upper right: the Japanese hiragana-script branches spell the title of the print, and the blossoms are made of coins. The poem to the left mentions the happiness in store at the willow trees—a metaphor for Yoshiwara, Edo's government-licensed pleasure district—suggesting that the pleasant nature and musical skills depicted here will bring good fortune.



Utagawa Toyokuni II (Toyoshige), Japanese, 1777-1835
Popular Comic: Bat Nikki (Ryukō kyōga Nikki), from the series
Contemporary Figures (Imayō sugata), 1830s
Polychrome woodblock print
Vertical ōban: 37 x 25.4 cm (14 9/16 x 10 inches)
Bequest of Isaac C. Bates 13.1408

An elaborately dressed and styled young shamisen player adjusts the bridge on her instrument. Framed above her are two frolicking bats personifying kabuki theater characters Nikki Danjō and Arajishi Otokonosuke. Kabuki plays were often accompanied by music, and Toyoshige's comical interpretation of this scene is fittingly enhanced with the anticipated sounds of the shamisen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KwVt0DLN1xg>



Torii Kiyomitsu II (Kiyomine), Japanese, 1787-1868
Year of the Horse, from the series *Twelve Signs of the Zodiac in Ukiyo-e (Ukiyo jyunishi)*, 1810s
Polychrome wood block print
Vertical ōban: 36.4 x 22.2 cm (14 5/16 x 8 3/4 inches)
Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 20.1155

In this print representing the Year of the Horse, a woman with a shamisen looks indulgently at a little boy riding a hobbyhorse. The round cartouche in the upper left frames a white horse, a sacred image in Japanese Indigenous belief. Seeing a white horse early in the year was considered auspicious.

Music pervaded joyous occasions, and prints that paired beautiful women and instruments were especially popular. Beyond the theater and entertainment districts, many households were filled with the strains of the shamisen, as shown in this domestic scene.



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Torii Kiyomitsu I, Japanese, ca. 1735-1785
Segawa Kikunojō II, early 1760s
Polychrome woodblock print (*benizuri-e*)
Hosoban: 31 x 13.8 cm (12 3/16 x 5 7/16 inches)
Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 20.1072

The elegant woman playing a hand drum (*tsuzumi*) is in fact an onnagata, or a male kabuki-theater actor impersonating a female character. This actor print (*yakusha-e*) depicts Segawa Kikunojō II (1741–1773), identified by the inscription on the right and the family crest on his sleeve. Depictions of actors on stage were popular, but off-stage images situating actors in private settings, amusing themselves with musical instruments—as in this print—delighted audiences who reveled in seeing their favorite actors behind the scenes.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Eng2KBI23E0>



Utagawa Kunisada (Toyokuni III), Japanese, 1786-1865
The Broom Tree (Hahakigi), from the series *Lingering Sentiments of a Late Genji Collection (Genji goshū yojō)*, 1857, 11th month
Left side of a polychrome woodblock-printed diptych with embossing and metallic pigments
Vertical ōban: 37.2 x 25.6 cm (14 5/8 x 10 1/16 inches)
Bequest of Isaac C. Bates 13.1410

Mitsuuji—an Edo-period version of the legendary prince Genji of the Heian period (794–1185)—is depicted here playing the flute. Mitsuuji plays to express his love and longing for a woman hidden behind the screen at right. The second print in this diptych depicts the lady.

Drawing on the 11th-century *Tale of Genji*, Ryūtei Tanehiko (1783–1842) produced a literary parody that inspired Kunisada to create this work. It is enhanced with printed gold flakes to evoke Heian-period aesthetics.



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Utagawa Kunisada (Toyokuni III), Japanese, 1786-1865
Enjoying Flowers in the Inner Garden (Oniwa hana no asobi), 1840s
Polychrome woodblock-printed triptych
Vertical ōban triptych: 37.8 x 77 cm (14 7/8 x 30 5/16 inches)
Bequest of Isaac C. Bates 13.2339



The Japanese tradition of blossom viewing, or *hanami*, is depicted in this triptych of three women preparing for a party in the garden of a vast estate. The woman on the right carries a wooden box with food while the woman on the left bears a heavy cask of sake; both wear aprons to protect their beautiful garments. The woman in the middle is dressed in a *furisode*, a long-sleeved garment worn by the young. She holds a vessel to rinse sake cups in one hand and with the other hoists a shamisen to her shoulder. Such outings were and still are opportunities to gather and indulge in music, food, and drink.

Kitagawa Utamaro, Japanese, 1754-1806
Ushiwakamaru Serenading Princess Joruri by Flute, 1790s
Polychrome woodblock-printed triptych
Vertical ōban triptych: 38.7 x 74.6 cm (15 1/4 x 29 3/8 inches)
Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 20.1144



This triptych presents an Edo-period interpretation of a scene from the beloved 15th-century *Tale of Jōruri* (*Jōruri monogatari*). According to the tale, when Ushiwakamaru (the military leader Minamoto Yoshitsune [1159–1189]) was 16, he chanced upon a gorgeous garden. In it, the beautiful Princess Jōruri was playing the zither, accompanied by her ladies on other instruments. Ushiwakamaru joined them on his flute, performing so enchantingly that he was invited inside. Here, Utamaro replaces the historical characters with contemporary courtesans and samurai, playful reworking the classic narrative.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4RbOwv-qLjQ>

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Chōbunsai Eishi, Japanese, 1756-1829

Beauties Boating on the Sumida River, 1790s

Two prints from a polychrome woodblock-printed triptych

37.2 x 48.9 cm (14 5/8 x 19 1/4 inches)

Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 20.1133

At first glance, these prints of Edo-period courtesans relaxing on a pleasure boat and indulging in music, food, and drink are not unusual, as they depict a popular contemporary pastime. Missing, however, is the left-most image depicting the historical figure Shizuka Gozen (1165–1211), a dancer typically identifiable by her trailing sleeves (see below). Gozen heightened an existing conflict between the samurai Minamoto Yoshitsune (1159–1189) and his brother, the shogun Minamoto Yoritomo (1147–1199). The dancing figure and Minamoto crest on the curtains of the boat evoke this historical reference.



Utagawa Hiroshige, Japanese, 1797-1858

Futakawa: Monkey Plateau (Futakawa, Sarugababa), from the series *Fifty-three Stations of the Tōkaidō Road (Tōkaidō gojūsan tsugi no uchi)*, ca. 1833

Polychrome woodblock print

Horizontal ōban: 24.1 x 36.5 cm (9 1/2 x 14 3/8 inches)

Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 41.080.34

Three *goze*, or blind female musicians, traverse a lonely landscape of seemingly endless rolling hills and valleys. Depicted here is Monkey Plateau, or Sarugababa, a site close to the Futakawa post station on the Tōkaidō road, a heavily traveled route between Edo (present-day Tokyo) and Kyoto during the Edo period. Busy routes like this one were filled with music supplied by blind musicians. Licensed by local authorities, *goze* traveled in small groups, playing the shamisen and singing in the villages and towns on the routes. This trio is approaching a teahouse famous in the area for rice cakes wrapped in oak leaves, a confection known as *kashiwa-mochi*.



Utagawa Hiroshige, Japanese, 1797-1858

Fushimi, from the series *The sixty-nine stations of the Kisokaidō (Kisokaidō rokujūkyū tsugi no uchi)*, late 1830s

Polychrome woodblock print

Horizontal ōban: 25.7 x 37 cm (10 1/8 x 14 9/16 inches)

Bequest of Isaac C. Bates 13.1055



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A giant cypress tree dominates this print depicting the Fushimi post station on the Kisokaidō road, one of five government-controlled highways in the Edo period. In front of the tree, a sword-bearing traveler passes two people with long-poled umbrellas and rain hats—members of a daimyo procession, the formal relocation feudal lords made in service to the ruling shogun. A pilgrim sleeps while travelers have a meal under the great tree's shade. A familiar sight on the road, blind female musicians carrying their instruments join the travelers, ready to provide amusement.

Utagawa Yoshimori, Japanese, 1830-1884
Cockerel, Ivy, and Drum, ca. 1860s
Polychrome woodblock print
Hosoban: 33.6 x 15.5 cm (13 1/4 x 6 1/8 inches)
Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 34.289

A majestic rooster with long trailing feathers is the focus of this print. Flanked by two chicks amidst swirling ivy leaves, the bird perches on a barrel drum. Music was present in all types of *ukiyo-e* prints, including the *kachōga* or bird-and-flower genre that this print belongs to.

This image is filled with auspicious symbolism. The pairing of a fowl and drum, known as *kanko-dori*, originated in ancient China as a reference to good governance. When the government ruled well, drums—symbolizing complaints—remained silent, and roosters nested within them.

