

Nature Studies: Early Bird-and-Flower Prints from the Rockefeller Collection,
June 7, 2002-September 1, 2002

Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, a Providence native, gave the RISD Museum an encyclopedic collection of Japanese bird-and-flower woodblock prints in 1934. They were created in the late 18th century when printmakers were experimenting with new subject matter and techniques, often borrowing from painting traditions. Artists were moving beyond typical representations of courtesans and kabuki actors printed in only two or three colors. Now they began to create “brocade prints,” often using at least a dozen colors. Many of the new nature prints had their compositional source in the elaborate bird-and-flower paintings of the Kano tradition, an academic school of painting derived from Chinese models. Other prints show the influence of the “cut-branch” tradition of Chinese flower painting or earlier native Japanese styles. The flowers and birds have symbolic meanings that are integral to their appreciation.

Together these works convey the vitality of the Japanese printmaking tradition at a very important moment of evolution and experimentation.

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Isoda Koryūsai, Japanese, active ca. 1764-1788
Mount Fuji, falcon and aubergines (Fuji to taka to nasu), ca. 1775
Color woodblock print
Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 34.542

Dreaming of falcons, eggplant, or Mt. Fuji on New Year's Eve is considered an auspicious omen for the coming year; this print combines all three in a single image.

The print is signed “Haruhiro,” a name used by Koryūsai on a few early works.



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Japanese
Murataya Jirobei, Japanese
Isoda Koryūsai, Japanese, active ca. 1764-1788
Suzuki Harunobu, Japanese, 1724-1770
Cormorants on boat and pinks (Nadeshiko ni ubune), 1770s
Polychrome wood block print
Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 34.544

The cormorant, which is a fishing bird, and the pinks (*nadeshiko*) are both identified in the poem so deftly inscribed in the cloud band that cuts the composition diagonally in half.



Isoda Koryūsai, Japanese, active ca. 1764-1788
Suzuki Harunobu, Japanese, 1724-1770
Cockerels fighting under flowering peach (Niwatori awase to momo), ca. 1773
Polychrome wood block print with embossing
Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 34.541



Kitao Shigemasa, Japanese, 1739-1820
Cockerel, hen and bamboo (Take ni niwatori), 1770s-1780s
Polychrome wood block print
Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 34.350



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Japanese

Kitagawa Utamaro, Japanese, 1754-1806

Cockerels and chrysanthemums (Kiku ni niwatori), ca. 1800-1810s

Polychrome woodblock print

Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 34.592



Isoda Koryūsai, Japanese, active ca. 1764-1788

Crane's nest and rising sun (Hinode sugomori no tsuru), 1890s

Polychrome woodblock print with embossing

Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 34.539

The crane is a symbol of longevity; when depicted against the background of the rising sun, it is associated with the first day of the New Year and wishes for long life and happiness. The pine, which also alludes to long life, is used as a New Year's decoration as well.



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Isoda Koryūsai, Japanese, active ca. 1764-1788

White herons and snow-covered reeds (Yukiashi ni shirasagi), ca. 1773

Polychrome wood block print with embossing

Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 34.553

In this print, the blue pigment of the water is made from a vegetable pigment that fades very easily. Its pristine condition here indicates that the print has not been overexposed to light. Note also the embossing that creates the texture of the herons' wings.



Suzuki Harunobu, Japanese, 1724-1770

Isoda Koryūsai, Japanese, active ca. 1764-1788

Cat, butterfly and begonias (Kaido ni cho to neko), ca. 1767

Polychrome wood block print with gauffrage

Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 34.421

The word for cat in Chinese (*mao*) is a homophone for the word for octogenarian, and the word for butterfly (*die*) sounds the same as that for a septuagenarian. Thus the combination of the cat and butterflies here conveys the wish that the recipient might live a long life of seventy or eighty years. It is common for the Japanese to borrow such symbolism from the Chinese visual vocabulary.



Isoda Koryūsai, Japanese, active ca. 1764-1788

Cranes (Tsuru), 1890s

Polychrome woodblock print

Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 34.540



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Okumura Masanobu, Japanese, 1686-1764
Peacock, 1710s
Woodblock print
Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 34.446



Kitao Shigemasa, Japanese, 1739-1820
Hawk and plum (Ume ni taka), 1770s-early 1780s
Polychrome wood block print
Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 34.364

Falcons are traditionally associated with martial strength; the flowering plum signals the coming of the New Year in Japan.



RISD MUSEUM

Kitagawa Utamaro, Japanese, 1754-1806

Hawk on Plum Branch, 1790s

Color woodblock print with mica

Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 34.583

Falcons are traditionally associated with martial strength; the flowering plum signals the coming of the New Year in Japan.



Kitao Shigemasa, Japanese, 1739-1820

Golden pheasants and bush clover (Hagi ni kiji), 1770s-early 1780s

Polychrome wood block print

Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 34.363

Bush clover (*hagi*) is one of the seven grasses of autumn.



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Isoda Koryūsai, Japanese, active ca. 1764-1788
Rock ptarmigan and pine (Matsu ni raicho), 1770s
Polychrome woodblock print
Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 34.550



Okumura Masanobu, Japanese, 1686-1764
Mandarin ducks, ca. 1710-1715
Woodblock print in black ink (sumizuri-e)
Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 34.444

Mandarin ducks are symbols of conjugal felicity.



Isoda Koryūsai, Japanese, active ca. 1764-1788
Mandarin ducks and plum in snow (Setsubai ni oshidori), mid 1700s-
late 1700s
Polychrome wood block print
Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 34.546

Mandarin ducks are symbols of conjugal felicity; they are frequently depicted in snow. Here the presence of the flowering plum signals the New Year's season.



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Isoda Koryūsai, Japanese, active ca. 1764-1788
Nishimuraya Yohachi, Japanese
Peacock and insect (Kujaku to mushi), 1770s
Polychrome woodblock print
Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 34.548



Kitao Shigemasa, Japanese, 1739-1820
Japanese stork and rose mallow (Fuyo ni konotori), 1770s-early 1780s
Polychrome wood block print
Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 34.362

The inscription in the upper right identifies the crane and the hibiscus by name.

