

## *The Artistry of Utagawa Kuniyoshi*, October 7, 2023 - April 7, 2024

One of the most influential Japanese printmakers of the 1800s, Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1797–1861) was born to a cloth dyer in Edo, Japan. As a child, he often copied illustrations from books. When he was just 15, his talent was recognized by the print designer Utagawa Toyokuni (1769–1825), who accepted Kuniyoshi into his studio.

Kuniyoshi began his career illustrating cheaply produced multi-volume novels known as *gōkan* 合巻, which were very popular in the early 1800s. He received his big break when he began designing warrior prints, creating images of legendary and historical Chinese and Japanese heroes in dynamic poses and expressive forms. Kuniyoshi proved equally adept at designing portraits of Kabuki actors and beautiful women. He also became known for his caricatures and humorous illustrations—an avenue for his wit, especially in times of strict censorship.

By the time of his death, Kuniyoshi had established a studio filled with students and apprentices. Successful print designers of the time often worked under similar arrangements, with assistants helping meet the demand for prints and students ensuring the legacy of the designer's name. Kuniyoshi's students learned by watching and working with him, and many compiled sketchbooks like the one on view here.

Wai Yee Chiong (張慧怡)  
Curator of Asian Art

This exhibition is dedicated to Elena Varshavskaya (1952–2023), a RISD faculty member (THAD) who spent her lifetime sharing her passion and love for Japanese *ukiyo-e* prints through teaching, presentations, and publications.

For more about Elena's contributions, please follow this link:

[https://digitalcommons.risd.edu/thad\\_studentwork\\_ukiyo-e\\_prints\\_exhibitioncatalogs/](https://digitalcommons.risd.edu/thad_studentwork_ukiyo-e_prints_exhibitioncatalogs/)

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## CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Utagawa Kuniyoshi 歌川国芳  
1798–1861; b. in Edo; worked in Japan  
Kawaguchiya Shōzō 川口屋正蔵, publisher  
Edo, Japan; ca. 1824–1852  
*Boarding a Boat* (船のりよう Funanori yō), from the series  
*Instructions in Manners for Modern Women* (当流女諸礼躰方 Tōryū  
onna shorei shitsukekata), 1830  
Polychrome woodblock print  
Bequest of Isaac C. Bates 13.1359



A woman prepares to board a boat, lifting her skirts as she descends to the riverbank. These actions appear to mirror the image of the monk on a boat in the inset on the upper left. The title of this print and the series it is from indicate that it was designed to instruct contemporary women on proper etiquette. In a time when censors prohibited portrayals of courtesans and women of the pleasure quarters, Kuniyoshi adapted by producing images of virtuous women. Many of these prints, however, contained sarcastic undertones, designed to mock the authorities.

Utagawa Kuniyoshi 歌川国芳  
1798–1861; b. in Edo, worked in Japan  
Iseya Ichiemon 伊勢屋市右衛門, publisher  
Edo, Japan; 1820–1870  
*Sakaki: Omiwa* (榊おみわ), from the series *Genji Clouds Mixed with Ukiyo-e Pictures* (源氏雲浮世画合 Genji kumo ukiyo-e awase), 1845–1847  
Polychrome woodblock print  
Bequest of Isaac C. Bates 13.1360



In this scene from a 1770s play, the daughter of a sake-shop owner is surrounded by mocking ladies-in-waiting. Above the theatrical scene is a scroll depicting a chapter from the 12th-century novel *The Tale of Genji*. With this juxtaposition, Kuniyoshi playfully creates a parody of sorts, linking canonical literature with popular theater of his day.

Utagawa Kuniyoshi 歌川国芳  
1798–1861; b. in Edo; worked in Japan  
Izumiya Ichibei 和泉屋市兵衛, publisher  
Edo, Japan; ca. 1686–1886  
*The Bride Changing Clothes After the Wedding Ceremony* (婚礼色直し  
之図 Konrei ironaoshi zu), 1844–1847  
Polychrome woodblock print  
Bequest of Isaac C. Bates 13.2318



Kuniyoshi's knowledge of textiles and his upbringing as the son of a textile dyer is evident in his skillful depiction of the rich brocades and patterned fabrics in this print. Part of a triptych displaying the behind-the-scenes activities of a bridal ceremony, this print also shows the diversity of garments available in the 1850s.

This composition is almost identical to an earlier print on the same subject by Kitagawa Utamaro, indicating that Kuniyoshi, like many designers, often appropriated earlier illustrations.

Utagawa Kuniyoshi 歌川国芳  
1798–1861; b. in Edo, worked in Japan  
Enomotoya Kichibei 榎本屋吉兵衛, publisher  
Edo, Japan; 1760–1850  
*Favorite Customs of the Present Day* (当盛風俗好 Tōsei fūzoku kō), early  
1830s  
Monochrome woodblock print with red  
Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 20.1308



Printed entirely in shades of blue with just a little red embellishment, Kuniyoshi here depicts a woman standing on a hill overlooking a bay of fishing boats. This work reflects a growing fascination with Berlin blue, also known as Prussian blue, a pigment used extensively in printing circles in the 1830s. Unlike vegetal dyes that faded easily, this imported synthetic pigment was more stable and vivid. These blue-hued prints, known as *aizuri-e*, achieve a painterly effect in their tonality. Their blue and white aesthetic echoed blue-and-white porcelains and indigo textiles that were popular at the time.

Utagawa Kuniyoshi 歌川国芳  
1798–1861; b. in Edo; worked in Japan  
Ibaya Sensaburō 伊場屋仙三郎, publisher  
Edo, Japan; ca. 1815–1875  
Matsushima Fusajirō 松島房次郎, block carver  
Active in Edo in the mid-1800s  
*Matsunaga Daizen at Kinkakuji*, from the series *Women in Waterfall-Striped Fabrics Giving Thanks for Answered Prayers* (大願成就有ヶ滝縞 Daigan jōju arigatakijima), 1843–1847  
Polychrome woodblock print  
Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 20.1309



Here Kuniyoshi depicts a woman dressed in a striped robe, holding a child who reaches for the water-squirting toy in her hand. This seemingly domestic scene is juxtaposed with the framed image at upper left, where a heroic figure stands in front of a waterfall. The woman's striped garment echoes the falls, and the dragons on her sash allude to Matsunaga Daizen, the warrior in the inset, who captured a famous painter's daughter to steal his sketch of a dragon.

Utagawa Kuniyoshi 歌川国芳

1798–1861; b. in Edo; worked Japan

Mikawaya Tetsugōrō 三河屋鉄五郎, publisher

Edo, Japan; ca. 1845–1858

*Toyotomi Hideyoshi Escapes Assassination on the Ship of Yojibei*, 1847–1852

Polychrome woodblock-printed triptych

Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 20.1310



A great ship rams into rocks, its passengers scattered among the crashing waves. The crest on the sails indicates that this is the ship of Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537–1598), a samurai lord who played an important role in unifying Japan. In this scene, Kuniyoshi depicts Hideyoshi's narrow escape from death when his sailor Yojibei ran the ship aground. Yojibei was put to death for the assassination attempt.

In Kuniyoshi's time, the ruling Tokugawa shogunate was extremely sensitive of images of Hideyoshi, a figure they had defeated generations before to gain control of the country. In the 1830s, Kuniyoshi became the first illustrator to revive imagery of Hideyoshi. The artist's glorification of this figure, as well as his adoption of the Hideyoshi crest as his seal, can be interpreted as anti-Tokugawa in sentiment.

For an in-depth essay by RISD students on this work, follow this link: [https://digitalcommons.risd.edu/thad\\_studentwork\\_ukiyo-e\\_prints\\_exhibitioncatalogs/6/](https://digitalcommons.risd.edu/thad_studentwork_ukiyo-e_prints_exhibitioncatalogs/6/)

Utagawa Kuniyoshi 歌川国芳  
1798–1861; b. in Edo; worked in Japan  
Sumiyoshiya Masagōrō 住吉屋政吾郎, publisher  
Edo, Japan; 1804–1860

*Theatrical Parody of the Sixteen Arhats* (美達住楼久楽翫 Mitate  
jūroku rakan), 1843–1847

Polychrome woodblock-printed triptych  
Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 20.1311



At first glance, this triptych shows a group of Buddhist arhats, or beings that have achieved enlightenment. Accompanied by mythical creatures, most of the arhats have halos around their heads—a sign of their divine status. For Edo-period audiences, however, these figures were recognizable as actors of the day. In a time that the production of portraits of actors was banned, Kuniyoshi avoided censorship by cleverly disguising famous celebrities in Buddhist garb. The title too is a pun that alludes to beautiful men in brothels.

Utagawa Kuniyoshi 歌川国芳  
1798–1861; b. in Edo; worked in Japan  
Ibaya Sensaburō 伊場屋仙三郎, publisher  
Edo, Japan; ca. 1815–1875  
*Chrysanthemums Under the Moon*, ca. 1830  
Polychrome woodblock print  
Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 34.324



Depicting chrysanthemums against a full moon within an oval frame, Kuniyoshi used autumn motifs to create a fan picture (*uchiwa-e*) that could be cut and mounted onto a bamboo frame for use. Most Japanese print illustrators made designs for fans during the Edo period (1615–1868), and Kuniyoshi was no exception. Examples like this one undoubtedly became popular fashionable accessories.

Attributed to Utagawa Kuniyoshi 歌川国芳  
1798–1861; b. in Edo; worked in Japan  
*Colorful Peonies and Lion Dogs* (深見草獅子彩色 Fukamigusa shishi no irodori), 1847–1852  
Polychrome woodblock print  
Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 34.394

Kuniyoshi was known for his playful illustrations, as seen in these colorful tree peonies that—on closer look—are composed of lion dogs (*shishi* (獅子)). Peonies and lion dogs have long been symbols of wealth in East Asian traditions. By combining this imagery with a poem about fortune and prestige, this print was probably made to convey good wishes for an auspicious occasion.



Katsushika Hokusai 葛飾北斎  
1760–1849; b. in Edo; worked in Japan  
Utagawa Kuniyoshi 歌川国芳  
1798–1861; b. in Edo; worked in Japan  
Tsuruya Kiemon 鶴屋喜右衛門, publisher  
Edo, Japan; ca. 1620–1852  
*Cover Design for Snow-Blown Chains of Fate* (花雪吹縁柵 Hana fubuki en no shigarami), 1832  
Polychrome woodblock print  
Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 34.492

Kuniyoshi began his career illustrating multi-volume novels known as *gōkan* 合巻. Images played a prominent role on each page of these books, animating the surrounding text. While the illustrations in the books were monochrome, the cover designs were multicolored. Hokusai and Kuniyoshi jointly designed this cover depicting a woman's face alongside a basket of fish and flowers—images that provide little information about the contents of the novel.



Utagawa Kuniyoshi 歌川国芳  
1798–1861; b. in Edo; worked in Japan  
Ibaya Sensaburō 伊場屋仙三郎, publisher  
Edo, Japan; ca. 1815–1875  
Yokokawa Takejirō 横川彫武, block carver  
Active in Edo in the mid-1800s  
*Plum Trees at Night (夜の梅 Yoru no ume)*, 1845–1846  
Polychrome woodblock-printed triptych  
Gift of Marshall H. Gould 46.295.11



The white blossoms of the Crawling Dragon Plum, a tree once famous in Edo, form the backdrop of this triptych. A popular attraction at the time this print was made, the tree presented quite the spectacle in the spring, drawing audiences like these women dressed in their finery. Kuniyoshi rendered the plum tree in painterly brushstrokes that were effectively articulated by the carver, Takejirō. Patterns of plum blossoms and the character for spring (春) adorn the women's robes, complimenting the image of the tree.

Attributed to Utagawa Kuniyoshi 歌川国芳  
1798–1861; b. in Edo; worked Japan  
*Preliminary Sketches*, ca. 1840–1860  
Ink on paper  
Museum Collection 49.437



To create a woodblock print, Kuniyoshi would make a sketch in ink on a thin piece of paper that the carver would then adhere to a woodblock, where the design was carved away. The carved block was then inked and stamped onto paper.

The preliminary sketches mounted into this album were images that were never used for carving a woodblock, but their dynamic designs and vivid brushstrokes undoubtedly inspired Kuniyoshi's students, who likely collected and compiled them for reference.



Utagawa Kuniyoshi 歌川国芳  
1798–1861; b. in Edo; worked in Japan  
Jōshūya Juzō 上州屋重蔵, publisher  
Edo, Japan; ca. 1812–1876  
Koizumi Kanegōrō 小泉兼五郎, block carver  
Active in Edo in the 1800s

*The Wada Rebellion: Asahina Saburō Yoshihide Attacking with Fierce  
Courage and Strength* (和田合戦朝夷三郎義秀猛勇怪力之図 Wada  
kassen Asahina Saburō Yoshihide mōyū kairyoku no zu), 1857

Polychrome woodblock prints

Gift of Paula and Leonard Granoff 85.197.8



Here Kuniyoshi depicts a historical 1213 battle and the superhuman strength of Asahina Saburō, a warrior of the Wada clan, who tilts an entire structure to topple his foes. Asahina was said to be the son of the legendary female warrior Tomoe Gozen. He is associated with incredible feats, including fighting sharks and crocodiles. Originally part of a triptych, these two prints show Asahina's valor and heroism as he appears to single-handedly defeat a host of attackers.

Utagawa Kuniyoshi 歌川国芳

1798–1861; b. in Edo; worked in Japan

Sumiyoshiya Masagōrō 住吉屋政吾郎, publisher

Edo, Japan; 1804–1860

Yokokawa Takejirō, block carver

Active in Edo in the mid-1800s

*Nakamura Kansuke Masatatsu* 中村勘助正辰, from the series *Portraits*

*of the Faithful Samurai of True Loyalty* (誠忠義士肖像 Seichū gishi shōzō), 1852

Polychrome woodblock print

Helen M. Danforth Acquisition Fund 1987.043.4



Lauded for his depictions of warriors, Kuniyoshi here captures not only the dynamism of the samurai Nakamura Masatatsu, but also his strength and endurance. Masatatsu bites his lip, narrows his eyes, and raises his sword as he fends off a blazing-hot pan that has been thrown at him.

This print is part of a series of portraits inspired by historical events surrounding a group of samurai avenging their lord, who was unjustly forced to commit suicide.

Utagawa Kuniyoshi 歌川国芳

1798–1861; b. in Edo; worked in Japan

Ibaya Sensaburō 伊場屋仙三郎, publisher

Edo, Japan; ca. 1815–1875

*Scribblings on the Storehouse Wall* (荷宝蔵壁のむだ書 Nitakaragura kabe no mudagaki), ca. 1847–1848

Polychrome woodblock print

Gift of Roger S. Keyes and Elizabeth Coombs 1998.72.7



In response to a prohibition by the shogunate against lavish prints of popular actors, Kuniyoshi depicted caricatures of his favorite celebrities scratched on the plaster wall of a storehouse, using the language of graffiti to defy the authorities. His name and the crest of his publisher are written in the gray section at the bottom of the print. Small sketches between the caricatures, such as the pagoda and elephant, allude to specific actors' names, adding to this work's playfulness and wit.

Utagawa Kuniyoshi 歌川国芳

1798–1861; b. in Edo; worked in Japan

Sōshūya Yohei 総州屋与兵衛, publisher

Edo, Japan; ca. 1802–1851

*Proof Impressions of Vengeance at Iga Pass* (伊賀越敵討図 Igagoe kataki-uchi no zu), 1835

Monochrome woodblock print with hand-coloring

Gift of Roger S. Keyes and Elizabeth Coombs 1998.72.8A



These are proof prints of Kuniyoshi's sketches for a triptych depicting a famous battle. Working off Kuniyoshi's designs, the woodblock carver and printer typically produced series of proof impressions; in this example, the basic outlines of figures and landscapes are delineated in black ink. These intermediary prints were then handed back to Kuniyoshi so that he could add further instructions for the carvers and printers.

Utagawa Kuniyoshi 歌川国芳  
1798–1861; b. in Edo; worked in Japan  
Sōshūya Yohei 総州屋与兵衛, publisher  
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*Proof Impressions of Vengeance at Iga Pass* (伊賀越敵討図 Igagoe kataki-uchi no zu), 1835  
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Utagawa Kuniyoshi 歌川国芳  
1798–1861; b. in Edo; worked in Japan  
Izumiya Ichibei 和泉屋市兵衛, publisher  
Edo, Japan; ca. 1686–1886  
*Onoe Kikugorō III as Tenjiku Kaja Conjuring Up Rats*, 1836  
Polychrome woodblock-printed triptych  
Elizabeth T. and Dorothy N. Casey Fund 2019.23.1



In this illustration of a popular Kabuki play, the actor Onoe Kikugorō III, seen in the center, conjures up rats in his supernatural role as a young magician. Led by a giant rat in priestly attire, an army of rats swarms the stage. Meanwhile, on the left and right, three figures prepare to defend themselves.

Kuniyoshi adeptly depicted the actors' expressions and gestures, animating the scene with vivid colors. His portrayal of hordes of rats spilling out of the curtains may be even more dramatic than the actual scene that took place in the theater.