

RISD MUSEUM

The Triptych Format in Japanese Prints, May 19, 2017–November 12, 2017

This exhibition focuses on three-paneled (triptych) woodblock prints made in Japan during the 1800s. Toward the end of the 1700s, artists had begun combining two or more sheets of paper to expand the surface area available for their compositions. Each section was printed separately, then the sheets were aligned. This resulted in a more sweeping design that suited panoramic landscapes and elaborate figural arrangements.

Many artists employed this more expansive format to add drama to shallow, stage-like settings depicting stories from literature or rituals, or to landscapes and architecturally framed scenes with receding space. Landscapes were not common subject matter in Japanese prints until the 1800s, and they worked particularly well on the grander scale of the triptych. The very striking and powerful designs on display here demonstrate how Japanese printmakers continually revitalized their tradition through innovations in format and composition.

Abby Aldrich Rockefeller (1874–1948), a daughter of Rhode Island senator Nelson W. Aldrich and the wife of John D. Rockefeller, Jr, was a lifelong supporter of the arts. Mrs. Rockefeller assembled a remarkable collection of Asian woodblock prints, donating more than 700 Japanese prints to the RISD Museum. Architect Philip Johnson was commissioned in 1952 by Mrs. Rockefeller's sons, Nelson and David, and her sister, Lucy Truman Aldrich, to design a room for the continuous exhibition of Japanese prints at the Museum. Originally located on the east side of this floor, the room has been recreated here to Johnson's specifications.

We are grateful to Deborah Del Gais, former RISD Museum curator of Asian art, for her research on the prints displayed here.

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Kikukawa Eizan
Japanese, 1787-1867
Sanoya Kihei, publisher
Japanese
Fashionable Winding-Water Banquet (Furyu kyokusui no en), 1810s
Three-paneled polychrome woodblock print
Bequest of Isaac C. Bates 13.1062



These women are engaged in a poetry competition known as a winding-water banquet, dating to as early as the Heian period (794–1185 CE). Banquet guests drank from cups of wine floating on the water and recited poetry.

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Katsukawa Shuntei
Japanese, 1770-1820
Kichizō Tsutaya, publisher
Japanese
River Battle (Kassen), 1808
Three-paneled polychrome woodblock print
Bequest of Isaac C. Bates 13.2329



This early battle scene portrays a detailed landscape extending to deep space, with a dense figural composition in the foreground.

Utagawa Kuniyoshi
Japanese, 1797-1861
Hachi, publisher
Japanese
Apparition of the Large Skeleton Summoned Before Otake Taro Mitsukuni and His Retainer by Takiyasha, Daughter of Taira no Masakado in His Haunted Soma Castle, ca. 1844
Three-paneled polychrome woodblock print
Bequest of Isaac C. Bates 13.2336



In this print, Takiyasha, daughter of a 10th-century provincial warlord who rebelled against the Kyoto court, invokes a monster skeleton to frighten Kyoto's representative, Mitsukuni. Mitsukuni (seen at the left of the central panel) courageously faces the fearful specter, eventually overcoming the princess's spells.

Utagawa Hiroshige
Japanese, 1797-1858
Okasawayaya Taheiji, publisher
Japanese
Mountains and Rivers Along the Kiso Road (Kisoji no yamakawa), 1857
Three-paneled polychrome woodblock print
Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 20.1295



Hiroshige's stark winter mountain scene extends beyond the picture plane in every direction, demonstrating how effectively the expanded triptych format presents a monumental, unified landscape.

Utagawa Kuniyoshi
Japanese, 1797-1861
Sumiyoshiya Masagoro, publisher
Japanese
Possibly Yokogawa Takejiro, block carver
19th century
Parody of the Sixteen Disciples of Buddha (Mitate Juroku rakan),



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1843-1847

Three-paneled polychrome woodblock print

Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 20.1311

People who have achieved complete understanding in the Buddhist tradition, known in Japan as *rakan*, are very much admired in East Asia and are frequently depicted in painting.

In this portrayal, the disciples of Buddha are presented as popular actors. During periods when censorship was strictly enforced, Japanese printmakers resorted to such strategies to evade the restrictions imposed on illustrating their favorite themes of actors and courtesans.

Utagawa Kuniyoshi

Japanese, 1797-1861

Recovering the Stolen Jewel from the Palace of the Dragon King (Ryugu Tamatori Hime no su), 1853

Three-paneled polychrome woodblock print

Elizabeth T. and Dorothy N. Casey Fund 2005.80



This tumultuous scene portrays a well-known Japanese story of the pearl diver Tamatori-hime as she is pursued by the Dragon King and a host of other sea creatures after recovering a magic gem. She is depicted as she cuts open her breast to hide the jewel.

An abstracted depiction of this print appears in the background of the RISD Museum's Edouard Manet painting *Repose* (ca. 1871), indicating that the French artist had firsthand knowledge of this work.

Keisai Eisen

Japanese, 1790-1848

Picture of the Kanzeon Rajin Gate at the Kinryuzan Sensoji Temple in Edo (Edo Kinryuzan Sensoji Kanzeon Rajinmon no zu), late 1820s

Three-paneled polychrome woodblock print

Elizabeth T. and Dorothy N. Casey Fund 2006.1



Eisen uses one-point perspective to draw the viewer's eye through the gate toward Kinryuzan Sensoji, the oldest Buddhist temple in Tokyo. On each side of the gate, behind the milling crowds, thunder gods are visible. A shop to the left sells incense; to the right are more shops, including one that sells tea.

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Utagawa Kunisada

Japanese, 1786-1865

Kichizō Tsutaya, publisher

Japanese

Yokogawa Takejiro, block carver

19th century

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

Three-paneled polychrome woodblock print

Gift of Marshall H. Gould 30.039.6



Because spring marks the beginning of the lunar year, the seventh month—the first month of autumn—usually falls in August of the Western calendar. These women seek to escape the heat on a veranda above the river, while other residents of the city are seen in the distance cooling themselves by boating in the moonlight.

Utagawa Kunisada

Japanese, 1786-1865

Kichizō Tsutaya, publisher

Japanese

Yokogawa Takejiro, block carver

19th century

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

Three-paneled polychrome woodblock print

Gift of Marshall H. Gould 30.039.9



The eighth month of the lunar calendar is the second month of autumn, and overlaps the Western month of September. This moonlit scene is set against autumn grasses. In Japan, the seven autumn grasses commonly symbolize this season.

Utagawa Hiroshige

Japanese, 1797-1858

Yamadaya Shojiro, publisher

Japanese

Enjoying the Evening Cool with Fireworks, Ryogoku Bridge (Ryogoku noryo ohanabi), 1847-1852

Three-paneled polychrome woodblock print

Gift of Marshall H. Gould 46.293.11



On summer evenings, the Ryogoku Bridge in Edo (now Tokyo) was a focus for entertainment that occasionally included dramatic displays of fireworks.