

Marking the Occasion: The Japanese Tradition of Surimono, February 3, 2006-May 28, 2006

Surimono (literally "printed objects") are distinguished from polychrome woodblock prints by the presence of a variety of texts integrated into their overall compositions. Privately commissioned and published as announcements, commemorations, or most often as New Year's greetings with poems, *surimono* exhibit elaborate printing and embossing techniques and the application of metallic dusts and colors on thick paper. The specialized division of labor common in the Japanese woodblock printing process was sometimes overlooked, as painters and poets designed prints and printers both carved and printed their designs.

The link between text and image in *surimono* is an important one. By the early 19th century, when most of these objects were made, the image and the accompanying poem were conceived together in what is now regarded as the characteristic format. Whether the poetry referred directly to the visual subject of the print or played upon it through word puns and allusions, the artwork was always infused with meaning and a sensuous beauty meant to be savored and enjoyed by its educated recipient.

Many of the selections in this exhibition are from a group of 88 prints presented to the Museum as a donation by George Pierce Metcalf in 1956. The group came from a single Osaka album, one of at least two that were presented as parting gifts to Raphael Pumpelly, a well-known geologist, during his travels in Japan in 1862-63, soon after that country opened its doors to the West. Not only are these some of the earliest prints to leave Japan, but the album's unique association with Osaka is confirmed through the inclusion of Osaka poets and printmakers whose works are not as well known as those from Edo (modern Tokyo). The numerous *kyōka* ("mad verse") poems by Tsurunoya Osamaru (d. 1839) and members of his circle, as well as the appearance of a *tsuru* ("crane") seal on many of the prints, make it clear that his patronage and that of his fellow poets provided the impetus for the creation of many of these works.

The RISD Museum of Art gratefully acknowledges the research of Dr. Roger S. Keyes, who has studied and published many of the works on exhibition here.

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

RISD MUSEUM

Totoya Hokkei, Japanese, 1780-1850
Cranes and young pines (Komatsu ni tsuru), ca. 1820
Polychrome woodblock print with embossing and metallic
embellishment
Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 34.370

Prints of this type were often intended as New Year's greetings, as indicated by the presence of cranes, which are symbols of longevity, and pine ornaments, traditional New Year's decorations. Additional auspicious wishes are conveyed by the symbols of the Seven Gods of Good Fortune printed in gold across the top.



Niwa Tōkei, Japanese, 1760-1822
Nandina berries and wild roses in snow (Setchu nanten to yamabuki), 1810s
Polychrome woodblock print with gofun
Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 34.411

Two courtesans, Kyō-ōgi ya and Kotsuru Take, commissioned this print. The winter imagery of the flowers is carried over to the splattered shell white of the snow and the shiny mica surface of the ice.



Kawanabe Kyōsai, Japanese, 1831-1889
Still life with weeping willow, plum and camellia (Seika shidareyanagi to ume to tsubaki), ca. 1880's
Polychrome woodblock print with embossing
Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 34.427

The spring imagery of this print indicates that it was probably made to commemorate the New Year.



Ko Sukei, Japanese, 1762-1817
Cranes, cherry, and old well (Furuido ni sakura to tsuru), ca. 1810
Polychrome woodblock print with embossing
Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 34.476



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Utagawa Hiroshige, Japanese, 1797-1858
Flying cranes, 1840-1850s
Wood block print with embossing
Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 34.481



It is not clear whether this print was intended as a *surimono* or very elaborate letter paper. It is included here because its imagery is closely related to that of other works in the exhibition.

Mori Shunkei, Japanese, active ca. 1800-1820
Camellia and narcissus (Tsubaki to suisen), ca. 1810'S
Polychrome woodblock print
Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 34.609



This large *surimono* is a self-commemoration of the sixtieth birthday (*kanreki*), probably of the first writer who inscribed a poem after the introductory preface on the right. Both of these flowers blossom early in the year, and the camellia in particular is associated with the New Year, the day on which everyone became a year older in premodern Japan. By Western count, the sponsor of the print would probably have been at least sixty-one.

Yanagawa Shigenobu, Japanese, 1787-1832
White Horse, 1822
Polychrome woodblock print with embossing
Gift of George Pierce Metcalf 56.039.16



This print was probably made as a New Year's greeting for the year of the horse, 1822.

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Ryuryukyo Shinsai, Japanese
Lobster and Cup, 1820s
Polychrome woodblock print
Gift of George Pierce Metcalf 56.039.21

Red boiled lobsters (*ebi*), set out with other New Year's foods, were used as ornamental decorations for the holiday. The character in the plate is the word for long life (*su*).



Ryuryukyo Shinsai, Japanese
Turtle Netsuke and Cloth, 1822
Polychrome woodblock print with metallic embellishment
Gift of George Pierce Metcalf 56.039.22

The *netsuke* (sash toggle) in the shape of a turtle in the foreground conveys a wish for long life, while the horse imprinted on the cloth below identifies this *surimono* as a New Year's greeting probably made for the year of the horse, 1822.



Ryuryukyo Shinsai, Japanese
Fan, Boxes, and Cloth, 1820s
Polychrome woodblock print
Gift of George Pierce Metcalf 56.039.26

The silk wrapping cloth (*fukusa*) is the focus of a still life that includes a fan and several boxes, at least one of which is lacquered. The plum branch, resting on what appears to be a silk covering for a sheet of paper, certainly alludes to the New Year.



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Sadaoka Gakutei, Japanese, 1786?-1868
Minamoto no Yoritomo with a Crane, 1820s
Polychrome woodblock print
Gift of George Pierce Metcalf 56.039.33

Yoritomo (1147-99), who in 1185 established the political power of the Minamoto clan and became *shogun* (military ruler) to the emperor, made a practice of releasing white cranes with labels attached to their legs. He asked that, when the cranes were found, he be informed and the cranes be released to fly again. The crane is a symbol of longevity. When depicted against the background of the rising sun, it indicates a wish for long life and happiness on the first day of the New Year. The poem on the left is by Tsurunoya, leader of the "crane" group.



Katsushika Hokusai, Japanese, 1760-1849
Hatakeyama Shigetada Carrying a Horse, 1822
Polychrome woodblock print
Gift of George Pierce Metcalf 56.039.41

Once again, the subject of the print probably identifies it as a New Year's greeting for the year of the horse, 1822.



Nagayama Kōin, Japanese, 1765-1849
Cakes Wrapped in Oak Leaves, possibly fifth lunar month of 1822
Polychrome woodblock print
Gift of George Pierce Metcalf 56.039.54

These rice cakes, known in Japanese as *Kashiwa mochi*, are filled with sweet bean paste and wrapped in oak leaves for the celebration of the Boys' Day Festival, a traditional holiday that fell on the fifth day of the fifth lunar month. In Modern Japan, the holiday is now called Children's Day and falls on May 5.



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Nagayama Kōin, Japanese, 1765-1849

Tortoise Carrying the Isle of the Immortals on His Back, mid-1820s

Privately commissioned woodblock print (surimono)

Gift of George Pierce Metcalf 56.039.55

The Japanese have a saying that “the crane lives for a thousand years and the tortoise for ten thousand.” The long-tailed turtle, the cranes perched on top of the Isle of the Immortals (Hōrai), and the isle itself all convey the conventional New Year’s wish for long life.



Baien, Japanese, d. 1886

Mirror and Rouge Cup, ca. 1825-27

Polychrome woodblock print with embossing and metallic embellishment

Gift of George Pierce Metcalf 56.039.59

The spring imagery of the three poems is combined with references to makeup to create intricate connections through the visual imagery of the print. The cranes, turtle, pine, and bamboo all allude to the New Year: pine and bamboo are used as New Year decorations, and cranes and turtles symbolize long life. The lunar New Year marks the arrival of spring and, to evoke the presence of a beautiful woman, a rouge cup is paired with the mirror on which these symbols appear. Baien has been identified as the poet Ki no Tsukunari.



Mochizuki no Kagenari

Statue of Buddha and a Lily, mid-1820s

Polychrome woodblock print

Gift of George Pierce Metcalf 56.039.68

It is likely that this *surimono* was made to commemorate Buddha’s birthday, which fell on the eighth day of the fourth lunar month in the traditional Japanese calendar (it is now celebrated on April 8). On that day, religious Buddhists wash a statue of the child Buddha in perfumed water. This print was designed by the poet Mochizuki no Kagenari, who signed his name Mochizuki.



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Yanagawa Shigenobu, Japanese, 1787-1832
Huang Chuping with a stone Goat (Huang Chuping and the Goat),
1823/1
Polychrome woodblock print
Gift of George Pierce Metcalf 56.039.7

This print was a New Year's greeting for 1823, the year of the goat. Huang Chuping was a Daoist adept who, after meditating for 40 years, found that he could bring life to his goats, which had turned to stone during his long retreat.



Nagayama Kōin, Japanese, 1765-1849
Inro, Turtle Netsuke, and Coral Bead, probably first lunar month of
1828
Polychrome woodblock print
Gift of George Pierce Metcalf 56.039.70

This was probably a New Year's print made for 1828. The tortoise resembles the turtle *inrō* (medicine box) displayed in the case in the center of the room.



Hayami Shungyosai II
Grapes, Scissors, and Porcelain Bowl, mid-1820s
Polychrome woodblock print
Gift of George Pierce Metcalf 56.039.71

This print was distributed by the Osaka poet Ōe no Kitayori on the occasion of a memorial service commemorating the anniversary of his father's death. The authors of the poems, including the leader of the "crane" poetry group, Tsurunoya, and the block cutter, Tani Seikō, had all experienced personal losses around the time that this print was made.



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Bokutei (?) Hyakuba

Stirrup, 1822

Polychrome woodblock print

Gift of George Pierce Metcalf 56.039.72

Here too, the subject of the horse stirrup probably identifies the print as a New Year's greeting for the year of the horse, 1822.



Jukōdō Yoshikumi, Japanese, fl. ca. 1803-1840

Actors passing Mount Fuji between the Yoshiwara and Hara stations on the Tokaido (Yakusha dochu yoshiwara hara fuji enbo), 1820s

Polychrome woodblock print

Gift of Roger S. Keyes and Elizabeth Coombs 1997.90.15



Announcements were often printed in the form of long *surimono*, such as this example by the Osaka printmaker Yoshikuni. The text of the announcement would have appeared above on a sheet comparable in size to that of the print.

Japanese

Turtle Inro with Sake Cup Netsuke, 1800s

Carved wood and ivory, held together by silk thread and a bead

Gift of Richard and Inge Chafee in memory of Francis H. Chafee

2005.86ab

This *inrō* (medicine box) is in the shape of a turtle, symbolizing long life.

Katsushika Hokusai, Japanese, 1760-1849

Asakusa-an Ichindo, Japanese

Tsutaya Jūzaburō, Japanese, 1750 - 1797

Illustrated dances of the east: Vol. 2, spring 1802

Illustrated woodblock-printed book

Gift of the Estate of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 31.395.2

This early book by Hokusai is a *kyōkaban*, an illustrated collection of the *kyōka* poetry ("mad verse") that was so often the source for the visual imagery and inscribed texts of *surimono*. Books of this type were widely produced beginning in the late 18th century.

RISD MUSEUM

Japanese; Edo

Mirror with Design of Pine, Bamboo, and Tortoises, 1800s

Copper Alloy

Bequest of Martha B. Lisle 67.199

Pine and bamboo are traditionally used as New Year decorations, and the long-tailed turtle symbolizes long life. Similar imagery, with cranes instead of tortoises, appears in the print illustrating a mirror (accession no. 56.039.59) while a long-tailed turtle carries the Isle of the Immortals on its back in the Kōin print (accession no. 56.039.55).

