

Shimmering Beauty: Kingfishers in Art and Poetry

December 20, 2025 - June 7, 2026

川蜩の 羽を粧ふて みつかゝみ

The kingfisher preening his feathers in a mirror of water

Distinctive for their long bills and impossibly brilliant coloring, kingfishers frequently appear in Japanese poetry. (The poem above is pictured in several prints in this exhibition.) From the 1800s, kingfishers were popular subjects of bird-and-flower prints (*kachō hanga*) as well. In these works, picture and poetry combine to highlight the bird's vivacity and lustrous colors. In China, too, kingfishers have long been celebrated for their iridescent feathers. For many centuries, Chinese artists employed the craft of inlaid kingfisher feathers (*diancui* 点翠) to decorate luxury objects and adorn accessories and jewelry.

This exhibition explores some of the meanings, origins, and contexts within Japanese kingfisher prints from the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller collection, as well as in a selection of Chinese jewelry and accessories embellished with kingfisher feathers.

Presented by Wai Yee Chiong, former curator of Asian art at the RISD Museum, with assistance from RISD 2025 Mellon summer interns Camille Blanco, Fiona LaCamera, Zhu Gao, and Zimo Yang.

RISD Museum is supported by a grant from the Rhode Island State Council on the Arts, through an appropriation by the Rhode Island General Assembly and a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, and with the generous partnership of the Rhode Island School of Design, its Board of Trustees, and Museum Governors

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Hairpin with Jade Bird, ca. 1800–1900
China, Qing Dynasty (1644–1912)
Gold, pearl, jade, and kingfisher feathers
Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke **20.381**



Earrings in the Shape of Dragons, ca. 1800–1900
China, Qing Dynasty (1644–1912)
Kingfisher feathers inlaid in gold
Gift from the Estate of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich **56.072**



Brooch in the Shape of a Butterfly, ca. 1900–1912
China, Qing Dynasty (1644–1912)
Kingfisher feathers inlaid in metal
Gift of Theodore Francis Green **D21.468**



The Chinese art of inlaying kingfisher feathers in a metal base, or *diancui*, reached its peak during the Qing Dynasty (1644–1912), when these objects were made. Featuring iridescent feathers, mirrors and metals that catch and reflect light, attached elements that tremble on spring coils, and hardstones such as jade to add liveliness and elegance, these accessories were highly sought after by royalty and wealthy patrons.

–Camille Blanco, RISD Museum Mellon summer intern 2025, Brown AB 2026

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Utagawa Hiroshige 歌川広重
1797–1858; b. and worked in Edo, Japan
Tsujiya Yasubei 辻屋安兵衛, publisher
1842–1863; Edo, Japan
Kingfisher, Reeds, and East Asian Water Lily, 1853
Polychrome woodblock print (*nishiki-e*)
Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. **34.156.1**



Utagawa Hiroshige 歌川広重
1797–1858; b. and worked in Edo, Japan
Tsujiya Yasubei 辻屋安兵衛, publisher
1842–1863; Edo, Japan
Kingfisher, Reeds, and East Asian Water Lily, 1853
Polychrome woodblock print (*nishiki-e*)
Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. **34.156.2**



Small shrimp by the shore, fleeing as the boat comes in under the summer's moon

The composition of these two impressions is almost identical except for the addition of the moon in the print on the left. Because bird-and-flower prints were popular, printmakers published multiple copies, sometimes making variations on the design. The poem's reference to the summer moon might signal that the print featuring the moon is the earlier edition. Multicolored woodblock prints are made using a different block for each color, so it was relatively easy for publishers to make changes to designs.

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Utagawa Hiroshige 歌川広重
1797–1858; b. and worked in Edo, Japan
Kingfisher and Roses, 1847–1852
Polychrome woodblock print (*nishiki-e*)
Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. **34.180**



Utagawa Hiroshige 歌川広重
1797–1858; b. and worked in Edo, Japan
Sanoya Kihei 佐野屋喜兵衛, publisher
1717–1875; Edo, Japan
Kingfisher and Iris, ca. 1840–1850
Polychrome woodblock print (*nishiki-e*)
Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. **34.254**



The kingfisher preening his feathers in a mirror of water

Printmakers often reused poems in different bird-and-flower prints. The haiku above appears at the upper left of these two impressions, despite their differences in composition. In both prints, the image of a kingfisher preening his feathers could allude to a man grooming himself before meeting a woman, symbolized by the blooms.

Typically monogamous for the breeding season, the kingfisher was a particularly popular subject in Japanese prints. It is associated also with the transient beauty of summer in *haiku* poetry. In Japanese, the common kingfisher is known as the *kawasemi*, which literally translates to “river cicada.” Cicadas are an insect whose song also evokes hot summer days.

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Utagawa Hiroshige II 二代目歌川広重
1826–1869; b. and worked in Edo, Japan
Kingfisher and Hydrangeas, 1857
Polychrome woodblock print (*nishiki-e*)
Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. **34.195.2**



Utagawa Hiroshige 歌川広重
1797–1858; b. and worked in Edo, Japan
Kingfisher and Chrysanthemums, ca. 1830–1840
Woodblock print (*sumizuri-e*)
Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. **34.361**



While the vivid coloring that characterizes many kingfisher species is lost in these mostly monochromatic prints, the bird's distinctive beak and the accompanying poems identify it. The predominant color in Hiroshige II's kingfisher with hydrangeas is Prussian blue. A rich pigment discovered in Germany in 1704, Prussian blue was widely put to use by Japanese printmakers in the 1820s.

The *haiku* poem on Hiroshige's print on the right is translated as "The kingfisher stopped by then flew away, far away the call of a grebe," alluding to the passing of summer and the coming of autumn in Japan.

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Headdress (Dianzi) with Phoenixes and Flowers, ca. 1850–1900
China, Qing Dynasty (1644–1912)
Silver and copper-alloy with gilding, kingfisher feathers, jadeite, imitation pearls, coral, glass, tourmaline, rose quartz; frame: metal wires with black and green silk floss and black satin
Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. **37.125**



Elaborate *dianzi* headdresses like this one were typically worn by wealthy Chinese women on their wedding days or during ceremonial occasions. A close look at the top and front reveals expert technique incorporating many different elements, including kingfisher-feather inlay, stonework, metalwork, and cloisonné, or enamel decoration.

–Camille Blanco, RISD Museum Mellon summer intern 2025, Brown AB 2026

Kitagawa Utamaro 喜多川歌麿
1754–1806; worked in Edo, Japan
Tsutaya Jūzaburō 蔦屋重三郎, publisher
1750–1797; Edo, Japan
Mallard Ducks and Kingfisher (鴨 翡翠 Kamo kawasemi), from the album *Myriad Birds: A Kyōka Competition* (百千鳥狂歌合 Momochidori kyōka awase), ca. 1790
Polychrome woodblock print (*nishiki-e*)
Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. **38.014**



Ever since we have made the house over I have wondered what to do with my little office room. I have just finished hanging my set of fourteen Ut[a]mar[o] prints there.

–Abby Aldrich Rockefeller in a letter to her sister Lucy, August 1920

This image of a kingfisher perched on a reed, looking down at two ducks, was likely one of the fourteen prints decorating Abby Aldrich Rockefeller's study in her Maine home. Originally bound in an album that paired depictions of birds with poetry, these works were considered feats of printmaking when they were first published for their meticulous details and gradated coloring.

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Meissen Porcelain Manufactory
1710–present; Meissen, Germany
One of a Pair of Kingfishers, 1735-1739
Porcelain with enamels and glaze
Gift of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich **41.136.1**



Meissen Porcelain Manufactory
1710–present; Meissen, Germany
One of a Pair of Kingfishers, 1735-1739
Porcelain with enamels and glaze
Gift of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich **41.136.2**



These ceramic depictions of the common kingfisher may not be as strikingly blue as the white-throated kingfisher preserved at right, but Meissen Porcelain Manufactory did capture their charm. Likely modeled after living specimens kept in captivity, these German works gesture to the development of scientific curiosity during the European Enlightenment, a period that valued the exploration of the natural world.

The ceramic kingfishers once belonged to Lucy Aldrich, Abby Aldrich Rockefeller's sister. Abby amassed a large collection of bird-and-flower Japanese prints, while Lucy collected many porcelain figures.

–Camille Blanco, RISD Museum Mellon summer intern 2025, Brown AB 2026

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

White-Throated Kingfisher (Halcyon smyrnensis)

Native to the Sinai Peninsula, the Indian Subcontinent, China, and Indonesia

Courtesy of The Edna W. Lawrence Nature Lab at Rhode Island School of Design



White-throated kingfishers are native to many parts of Asia. The brilliant blue coloring sported by this and many other kingfisher species comes not from pigmentation, but from the way microscopic protein structures in their feathers reflect light. Because this structural coloring does not fade over time, kingfishers were hunted to supply Chinese craftsmen with bright feathers used to adorn jewelry and accessories for royalty and the wealthy elite.

Today, more than one-third of the 118 kingfisher species worldwide are considered threatened or endangered, and the Chinese government now classifies the white-throated kingfisher as a protected species. Several subspecies of the common kingfisher (portrayed in the porcelain figures) are widely found across Asia, Europe, and northern Africa. In general, healthy kingfisher populations point to healthy freshwater ecosystems.

Utagawa Hiroshige 歌川広重

1797–1858; b. and worked in Edo, Japan

Kingfisher, Nandina Berries, and Reeds, ca. 1840–1850

Polychrome woodblock print (*nishiki-e*)

Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. **34.032**



Kingfishers are depicted many times throughout the more than 700 prints in Abby Aldrich Rockefeller's bird-and-flower collection. Whether pairing them with poems on long slender sheets modeled after the paper strips used for poetry writing or presenting them in smaller dimensions intended for more intimate viewing, Japanese printmakers repeatedly returned to these remarkable birds, capturing and adapting their likenesses across different formats.

Utagawa Hiroshige 歌川広重
1797–1858; b. and worked in Edo, Japan
Kawaguchiya Shōzō 川口屋正蔵, publisher
1824–1852; Edo, Japan
Kingfisher and Viburnum, ca. 1840–1850
Polychrome woodblock print (*nishiki-e*)
Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. **34.157**



Utagawa Hiroshige 歌川広重
1797–1858; b. and worked in Edo, Japan
Kawaguchiya Shōzō 川口屋正蔵, publisher
1824–1852; Edo, Japan
Kingfisher and Hibiscus, ca. 1840–1850
Polychrome woodblock print (*nishiki-e*)
Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. **34.205**



Utagawa Hiroshige 歌川広重
1797–1858; b. and worked in Edo, Japan
Kingfisher and Hibiscus, ca. 1830–1840
Polychrome woodblock print (*nishiki-e*)
Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. **34.306**



Keisai Eisen 溪斎英泉
1790–1848; b. and worked in Edo, Japan
Yamamotoya Heikichi 山本屋平吉, publisher
1816–1886; Edo, Japan
Kingfisher and Bamboo, ca. 1820–1830
Polychrome woodblock print (*nishiki-e*)
Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. **34.513**

