

## ***A Medley of Irises***

June 13, 2026 - March 14, 2027

Irises occupy an important place in Japanese visual and literary arts. Many different varieties are native to Japan, with most Japanese irises growing in wet, marshy lands. These red-purple flowers are associated with summer, as they bloom at the beginning of June, coinciding with the rainy season.

This exhibition highlights the art of the iris from the 1700s to the 1900s in Japanese woodblock prints, books, and ceramics. Illustrations of famous iris-viewing sites and iris floral arrangements provide glimpses of how these blooms were appreciated and enjoyed across Japanese society. Depictions of irises across various mediums indicate their importance as a design motif and their significance in classical Japanese literature.

Curated by Wai Yee Chiong, E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Curator of East Asian Art, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, and former curator of Asian art, RISD Museum.

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## CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Japan, Edo period (1615–1858)  
*Yatsushiro Ware Tea Bowl*, ca. 1800–1900  
 Stoneware with white slip under glaze  
 Gift of Isaac C. Bates **09.065**



Japan, Edo period (1615–1858)  
*Kutani Ware Bottle*, ca. 1700–1800  
 Porcelain with enamels over glaze  
 Bequest of Isaac C. Bates **13.215**



In the style of Ogata Kenzan  
 1663–1743; b. in and worked in Kyoto, Japan  
*Covered Bowl with Irises*, ca. 1875–1900  
 Earthenware with enamels under glaze  
 Bequest of Isaac C. Bates **13.249**

The potter who made the bowl brushed white slip on dark stoneware to outline the iris, while the other two potters painted the same blooms in colorful enamels on white porcelain. The variety of iris designs and patterns testifies to the popularity of irises as a motif for ceramics. Many depictions, such as the one on the Kenzan-style bowl, were adapted from paintings and literary references, adding meaning to these vessels.



## CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Utagawa Hiroshige 歌川広重

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

Fujiokaya Keijirō 藤岡屋慶次郎, publisher

ca. 1843–1923; Edo, Japan

*Iris Garden at Horikiri* (堀切の花菖蒲 Horikiri no hanashōbu),

from the series *Famous Places in the Eastern Capital* (東都名所 Tōto meisho), 1852

Polychrome woodblock-printed triptych (*nishiki-e*)

Bequest of Isaac C. Bates **13.2330**



Utagawa Hiroshige 歌川広重

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

Utagawa Kunisada 歌川国貞 (Toyokuni III)

1786–1865; b. and worked in Edo, Japan

Moriya Jihei 森屋治兵衛, publisher

1797–1886; Edo, Japan

*Iris Garden at Horikiri in the Eastern Capital* (東都堀切花菖蒲 Tōto Horikiri hanashōbu), 1857

Polychrome woodblock-printed triptych (*nishiki-e*)

Bequest of Isaac C. Bates **13.2333**



In these printed triptychs, people partake in flower viewing (*hanami*) in the Horikiri iris garden, a popular site in Edo (now Tokyo). Families stroll and picnic on verandas overlooking a sea of irises, most of which are of the *hanashōbu* variety. Located east of the Ayase River, the garden still welcomes large crowds today in early to mid-June.

## CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Utagawa Kunisada 歌川国貞 (Toyokuni III)

1786–1865; b. and worked in Edo, Japan

Tsutaya Kichizō 蔦屋吉蔵, publisher

1830–1859; Edo, Japan

Yokokawa Takejirō 横川彫武, block carver

active mid-1800s in Edo, Japan

*The Fifth Month: Flower Arranging Contest* (皀月生花合 Satsuki, Ikebana awase), from the series *The Twelve Months* (十二月ノ内 Jūni tsuki no uchi), 1854

Polychrome woodblock-printed triptych (*nishiki-e*)

Gift of Marshall H. Gould **30.039.7**



Kitagawa Utamaro 喜多川歌麿

1804–1855; worked in Edo, Japan

*Flower Arrangement with Iris and Nuphar*, ca. 1810

Woodblock print (*sumizuri-e*)

Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. **34.577**



Irises are popularly used in the Japanese art of flower arrangement. In the triptych, Kunisada depicts three figures engaged in this practice, one of whom is carefully cutting and placing irises into an elaborately carved vase. Prints and manuals with flower-arrangement examples, such as the design by Utamaro, offered practitioners references and ideas.

The art of flower arrangement in Japan, known as *kadō* or *ikebana*, originated in the 500s with Buddhist flower offerings. By the 1400s these practices had formalized into an art with different schools and teachings.

## CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Sakai Hōitsu 酒井抱一  
1761–1829; b. in Edo, Japan; worked in Kyoto and Edo, Japan  
*Ōson's Picture Album* (鶯邨画譜 Ōson gafu), 1817  
Woodblock-printed book  
Gift of the Estate of Mrs. Gustav Radeke **31.408**



Kamisaka Sekka 神坂雪佳  
1866–1942; b. in and worked in Kyoto, Japan  
*Iris*, page from *Flowers of a Hundred Worlds* (百々世草 Momoyogusa) vol. 1, 1909–1910  
Woodblock-printed book  
Helen M. Danforth Acquisition Fund **2006.38.1**



Sakai Hōitsu's and Kamisaka Sekka's painterly, abstract depictions of irises emphasize color rather than outlines. This distinct style stems from the artists' ties to the Rinpa school, a painting lineage that originated in Kyoto in the 1600s. Drawing from court painting and craft traditions, Rinpa artists worked in diverse mediums, from ceramics and screens to textiles and prints. Sekka's purple irises, floating above a swath of green, echo the design on the Kenzan-style bowl across the room.

## CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Utagawa Hiroshige 歌川広重  
1797–1858; b. and worked in Edo, Japan  
*White Heron and Iris*, ca. 1830–1840  
Polychrome woodblock print with embossing (*nishiki-e*)  
Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. **34.274**



Nakayama Sūgakudō 中山嵩岳堂  
active 1850–1860 in Edo, Japan  
Tsutaya Kichizō 蔦屋吉蔵, publisher  
1830–1859; Edo, Japan  
*Heron and Iris* (鶯 はな菖蒲 Sagi Hanashōbu),  
from the series *Forty-Eight Hawks Drawn from Life* (生写四十八鷹 Iki  
utsushi shijūhachi taka), 1859  
Polychrome woodblock print with embossing (*nishiki-e*)  
Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. **34.569**



These two prints pair white herons with the *hanashōbu* iris, easily distinguished by its large purple petals that hang down and its distinctive yellow stripe. While Hiroshige pictured a heron swooping down on the irises, one of his students, Sūgakudō, depicted the bird hiding among the iris stalks. Both illustrators used embossing techniques to add texture and tactility to the surface of their prints.

Utagawa Hiroshige 歌川広重  
1797–1858; b. and worked in Edo, Japan  
Uoya Eikichi 魚屋栄吉, publisher  
1855–1866; Edo, Japan  
*Horikiri Iris Garden* (堀切の花菖蒲 Horikiri no hanashōbu),  
from the series *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo* (名所江戸百景  
Meisho Edo hyakkei), 1857  
Polychrome woodblock print (*nishiki-e*)  
Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. **34.413**



In this print by Hiroshige, we peer through a few tall irises out onto a view of water and a field of flowers in the Horikiri iris garden, a famous site. Its marshy environment is ideal for irises, and more than 200 varieties have been cultivated there since the 1600s. Thousands of irises bloom in the garden every summer.

## CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Takeuchi Seihō 竹内栖鳳  
1864–1942; b. and worked in Kyoto, Japan  
*Grasshopper and Iris*, ca. 1920–1930  
Polychrome woodblock print  
Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. **34.434**

Composed without outlines and using sparse colors, this print of an *ayame* iris, a grasshopper perched under one of its leaves, captures the lyricism of Takeuchi Seihō's paintings. A Kyoto-based painter who trained in both traditional Japanese and Western techniques, Seihō was an influential figure in the art world at the turn of the 20th century, exhibiting in national as well as international venues. The popularity of his paintings created a market for printed reproductions of his works.



Kitao Masayoshi 北尾政美  
1764–1824; b. in Edo, Japan; worked in Japan  
*Wagtail* (鶺鴒 Sekirei), from the album *Birds from Abroad* (Raikin zui 来禽図彙), 1790  
Polychrome woodblock print  
Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. **34.524.2**



Kitao Masayoshi's illustration of a wagtail bird and an iris draws on the *Mogu* ("boneless") Chinese painting style, emphasizing depictions without outlines or contour lines. This print is part of *Birds from Abroad*, an album that was considered a technological feat when it was published in 1790. Its detailed, realistic images were made using complex printing techniques, such as embossing and metallic pigments. Multicolor printing was still a relatively new invention at the time, and lavish works that emulated paintings were highly prestigious.

## CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Asada Benji 麻田辨次

1900–1984; b. in Kaneoka, Japan; worked in Japan

*Irises*, ca. 1930–1940

Woodcut print

Gift of Steven G. Levine and Freeman T. Freeman **2024.4.16**

Printing on gold paper, Asada Benji impressed the irises in this woodcut in vivid colors, their stalks blending together. He effectively captures the aesthetics of the Rinpa school, some of whose works are on display in the adjacent case. Rinpa artists often dropped ink or color on wet surfaces (*tarashikomi*) to create blurred effects, seen here in the pooling of black ink in the leaves and stems of the irises.

