

Process and Function: Traditional Japanese Printmaking Technique,
January 19, 2007-May 27, 2007

Woodblock printmaking was known in Japan from as early as the Nara period (710 -94), but it was used almost exclusively for printing Buddhist and Chinese texts until the end of the 16th century. The political ascendancy of the Tokugawa shogunate marked the beginning of the Edo period (1603 - 1867), an extended epoch of peace and prosperity. From the 17th century onward, literacy became more widespread, and the demand for printed books increased. Pictures were added to printed texts, and these monochrome woodblock images inspired the making of singlesheet prints. Woodblock technique slowly evolved during the 18th century, as prints gradually became colored, at first by hand and then by using multiple blocks, one for each color in the composition of an individual print. Harunobu (1725-70) is traditionally credited with the creation of multiple-block prints, called "brocade prints" (*nishiki-e*), in 1765. Initially, poetry societies privately commissioned these as calendar prints (*egoyomi*). Generally, polychrome prints required at least ten to twelve or more blocks, one for each hue. From a technical standpoint, the mid-18th-century development of registration marks (*kento*) cut into the blocks was critical to the evolution of full-color printing. It insured a precise alignment of the multiple blocks impressed in succession onto the sheet of paper.

During the Edo period, the name that appeared on the print was that of the designer who conceived the overall composition of the work. He usually sold his design to a publisher, who would then work with the designer as the blocks were carved and prepared for printing by specialists. (Privately commissioned prints - *surimono* - are an exception to this pattern.) Two prints in this exhibition are paired with similar drawings to illustrate how compositions were conceived and presented to the publisher. The publisher, of course, had to produce them as cost-effectively as possible. Several examples in this room illustrate how two or more prints were made from one block and then cut apart before sale. One pair of prints also illustrates how a variety of impressions was made from a set of woodblocks. In some cases special effects such as ink gradations (*bokashi*) and embossing were intrinsic to production, whereas in others less labor-intensive printing methods were employed to expedite the process. Prints could be made into decorations for the vertical wooden pillars of a traditional Japanese house, hanging scrolls, fans, book covers, or envelopes for correspondence and announcements.

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Japanese
Hishikawa Moronobu, Japanese, ca. 1618-1694
Procession, mid 1700s
Monochrome woodblock print (sumizuri-e) with hand-applied color
Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 20.1053

This early black-ink print illustrates how hand-coloring was added to enhance the work's appearance. The red-lead pigment (*tan*) has



RISD MUSEUM

deteriorated to gray in places. The silk border around the perimeter and a backing are what remain of a mounting, indicating that this work was originally displayed as a hanging scroll.

Tōshūsai Sharaku, Japanese

Matsumoto Koshiro IV as the fishmonger Sanya no Sakanaya Gorobei in the play Katakuchi noriaibanashi (A medley of tales of revenge) performed at the Kiri Theater 1794, 1794

Polychrome wood block print with dark-silver mica ground

Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 20.1132

Not only is this print an example of full polychrome woodblock printing, but its intense mica ground, first used by Sharaku for his innovative portraits of actors in close-up views, is a technical accomplishment that exemplifies the Japanese woodblock artist's continual search for new methods and techniques.



Utagawa Hiroshige, Japanese, 1797-1858

Three landscapes; preliminary drawings for 3 tanzaku prints, 1830's-1840s

Ink on paper mounted on paper

Elizabeth T. and Dorothy N. Casey Fund 2000.83

These preliminary drawings for three vertical-format (*tanzaku*) prints may be compared with the three *tanzaku* prints to the right to illustrate how such prints were conceived. Note how the drawing on the left has been corrected twice through the addition of sheets of paper. The digital images below show the two previous stages of the design.



Yamamoto Shōun, Japanese, 1870-1965

Keyblock for Enjoying the Evening Cool (Yūsuzu), from the album Views of the Four Seasons (Shiki no nagame), 1906

Carved cherry woodblock

Elizabeth T. and Dorothy N. Casey Fund 2005.2



This keyblock was used to print the black outlines and the hair in the print. Note the registration marks (*kento*) along the bottom edge and

RISD MUSEUM

in the lower right corner. These carved markings served to align the sheet of paper on each of the blocks during the printing process.

Yamamoto Shōun, Japanese, 1870-1965

Matsuki Heikichi, Japanese

Views of the Four Seasons, 1906

Ink, colors, metallic embellishments, gofun, and embossing on paper

Elizabeth T. and Dorothy N. Casey Fund 2006.102

The keyblock was used to print the black outlines and the contours of the hair in the print on the right-hand page of this album.



Utagawa Hiroshige, Japanese, 1797-1858

Edoya Matsugoro

Tanzaku Triptych, 1840s

Polychrome wood block print

Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 34.091

These three narrow vertical-format compositions (*ko-tanzaku*) again illustrate how several prints could be produced from a single sheet of paper. Each color was printed from blocks on which all three designs were carved together.



RISD MUSEUM

Utagawa Hiroshige, Japanese, 1797-1858

*Nihonbashi (inscribed), A set of envelopes of the fifty-three stations
[of the Tōkaidō], 1840s*

Polychrome woodblock print

Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 34.110A

The Japanese use long, narrow envelopes such as these for enclosing letters and other documents.



RISD MUSEUM

Utagawa Hiroshige, Japanese, 1797-1858

Gojūsan tsugi fūtō (Envelopes of the Fifty-three Stations of the Tōkaidō) (inscribed), A set of envelopes of the fifty-three stations [of the Tōkaidō], 1840s

Polychrome woodblock print

Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 34.110B

The Japanese use long, narrow envelopes such as these for enclosing letters and other documents.



RISD MUSEUM

Utagawa Hiroshige, Japanese, 1797-1858

Maisaka, Imagiri (inscribed), A set of envelopes of the fifty-three stations [of the Tōkaidō], 1840s

Polychrome woodblock print

Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 34.110C

The Japanese use long, narrow envelopes such as these for enclosing letters and other documents.



RISD MUSEUM

Utagawa Hiroshige, Japanese, 1797-1858

Sun and Banners (Gojūsan tsugi tsuzuki-e fûtō), A set of envelopes of the fifty-three stations [of the Tōkaidō], 1840s

polychrome woodblock print

Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 34.110D

The Japanese use long, narrow envelopes such as these for enclosing letters and other documents.



RISD MUSEUM

Utagawa Hiroshige, Japanese, 1797-1858

Hamamatsu, Sansa no matsu (Gojūsan tsugi tsuzuki-e fûtō), A set of envelopes of the fifty-three stations [of the Tōkaidō], 1840s

Polychrome woodblock print

Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 34.110E

The Japanese use long, narrow envelopes such as these for enclosing letters and other documents.



RISD MUSEUM

Utagawa Hiroshige, Japanese, 1797-1858

Kawaguchiya Shozo, Japanese

Horned Owl, Pine, and Crescent Moon (Mikazuki shōjō no mimizuku),
1830s

Color woodblock print

Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 34.220

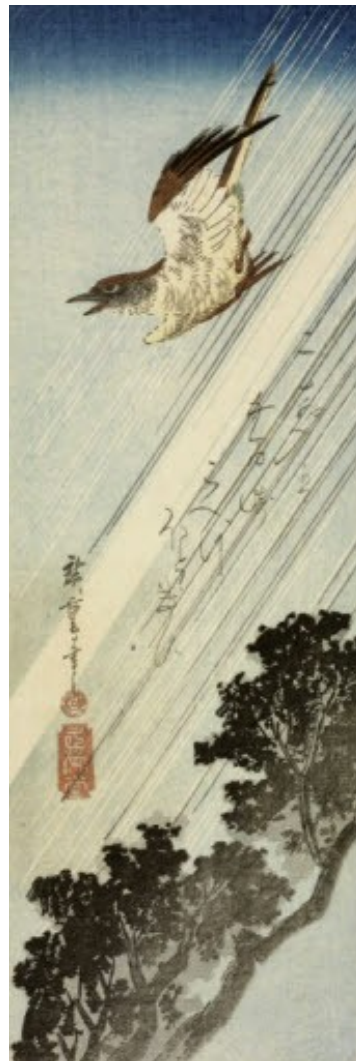
It is possible that these two prints were printed together from the same block. The narrow black line along the lower left edge of *Cuckoo in the Rain* exhibited to the right agrees with the pines along the right edge of this print.



RISD MUSEUM

Utagawa Hiroshige, Japanese, 1797-1858
Kawaguchiya Shozo, Japanese
Cuckoo in rain (Uchû no hototogisu), 1830s
Polychrome woodblock print
Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 34.247

It is possible that these two works were printed together from the same block set. The narrow black line along the lower left edge of this print agrees with the pines along the right edge of *Owl, Pine, and Crescent Moon* exhibited to the left.



RISD MUSEUM

Utagawa Hiroshige, Japanese, 1797-1858

Kawaguchiya Shozo, Japanese

White eyes and snake gourds; Small bird and herbaceous peonies,
1830s

Polychrome woodblock print

Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 34.271

These two uncut prints were designed and printed on a single sheet of paper from the same set of woodblocks. Standard-size prints composed on standard-size papers made the process of printing more efficient and cost-effective.



RISD MUSEUM

Utagawa Hiroshige, Japanese, 1797-1858
Wakasaya Yoichi, Japanese
Pheasant and chrysanthemums (Kiku ni kiji), 1830s
Polychrome wood block print with embossing
Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 34.278.1

Compare this early impression with the second edition to the right, which lacks embossing and is executed in a very different color scheme.



Utagawa Hiroshige, Japanese, 1797-1858
Sanoya Kihei, Japanese
Pheasant and chrysanthemums (Kiku ni kiji), 1830s
Polychrome wood block print
Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 34.278.2

Compare this second edition with the early impression to the left, which has embossing and a very different color scheme.



RISD MUSEUM

Nishimura Shigenaga, Japanese, ca. 1697-1756
Igaya Kanemon, Japanese
Ducks (Kamo), 1740s
Polychrome woodblock print
Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 34.291

The complicated technique utilized here represents one stage in the development of full polychrome woodblock printing. Three woodblocks -- light and dark gray and black -- were used for printing; then the print was hand-colored with red and yellow pigments; and, finally, metallic embellishments were added. Works of this type were known as "lacquer prints."



Torii Kiyomitsu I, Japanese, ca. 1735-1785
Nishimuraya Yohachi, Japanese
Cranes, pine, plum and moon, 1760s
Monochrome keyblock print
Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 34.292

This print is a keyblock impression that was never colored. Note the registration marks (*kento*), visible in the upper and lower right corners. These marks would also have been carved on each of the color blocks to insure the correct alignment of the paper during the printing process.



RISD MUSEUM

Utagawa Hiroshige, Japanese, 1797-1858
Preparatory drawings: Titmouse on plum branch; Mandarin ducks under snow-laden bamboo, 1840s
ink and color on paper
Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 34.296

This finely finished drawing by Hiroshige was apparently never employed for a print. Usually drawings of this type did not survive because they were cut up as the block cutter traced the design with a sharp tool onto the keyblock. The double composition demonstrates how prints such as that to the right would have been designed and prepared for printing from a single block.



Utagawa Hiroshige, Japanese, 1797-1858
Golden pheasant and snow-covered pine (Setchu komatsu ni kinkei), 1830s
Polychrome woodblock fan print (uchiwa-e)
Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 34.302

This former fan was clearly used. Note the traces of an arc of bamboo supports and the damage to the paper on the left.



Okumura Masanobu, Japanese, 1686-1764
Horses, 1710s
Monochrome woodblock print (sumizuri-e)
Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 34.447

This spectacular composition is an early monochrome experiment with bird-and-flower subject matter. Interestingly, Masanobu signs the print "the Japanese painter Okamura Masanobu" (Yamato eshi Okamura Masanobu). By inscribing his work in this way, he is claiming his place as a "painter" in a long lineage of artists working in a Japanese painting style associated with the Heian-period court (794-1185).



RISD MUSEUM

Katsushika Hokusai, Japanese, 1760-1849
Canary and herbaceous peony, ca. 1834
ink on paper
Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 34.484

This drawing resembles the Hokusai print to the left, although it is not the artist's original design for that work. Since it is inscribed with color notations, it also indicates how a sketch could be used by the publisher and block cutter in the print production process.



Katsushika Hokusai, Japanese, 1760-1849
Utagawa Kuniyoshi, Japanese, 1797-1861
Tsuruya Kiemon, Japanese, late 18th century-mid 19th century
Cover design for Isobe's illustrated book Snow-blown Chains of Fate (Hana fubuki en no shigarami), published spring 1832
polychrome wood block print
Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 34.492

Much of the design of this book cover should most likely be attributed to Hokusai. Kuniyoshi was probably responsible for the figure on the left, based upon the placement of his signature above her.



Katsushika Hokusai, Japanese, 1760-1849
Canary and herbaceous peony (Shakuyaku kanaari), *Untitled (known as Small Flowers)*, ca. 1834
Polychrome wood block print
Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 34.500

This is a later impression of a print from Hokusai's "Small Flowers" series, exhibited here for comparison with the drawing to the right, which shares a similar composition.



RISD MUSEUM

Isoda Koryūsai, Japanese, active ca. 1764-1788
Pheasants and pine in snow (Sessho ni kinkei), 1770s
Polychrome woodblock pillar print
Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 34.638

This type of print sometimes decorated the wooden pillars of Japanese house interiors.

