

RISD MUSEUM

Genre in Kunisada's Prints of the Twelve Months, September 3, 2004-January 2, 2005

The subject of the twelve months was first introduced into the Japanese print repertory in the 18th century by Okumura Masanobu (1686-1764), a highly innovative Japanese printmaker. In contrast to mainstream depictions of kabuki actors and courtesans boldly framed against a simple ground, this new type of work from the beginning encompassed scenery as well. These mid-19th-century renditions by Utagawa Kunisada (1786-1865) have expanded to occupy three sheets of paper in triptych format. The monumental compositions place each month's theme within an elaborate domestic interior or a landscape environment.

Kunisada's series is constructed around the depiction of seasonal activities and holiday observances as performed by women, in most cases. He alternates mundane activities such as cooking (*The Fourth Month*) with the preparation of rice cakes (*mochi*) for the New Year's holiday (*The Twelfth Month*), contrasting simple daily routines with holiday preparations and the special activities associated with them. The passage of time is defined in terms of how the extraordinary (*hare*) punctuates and offsets the cycle of daily life (*ke*). Festival days (*harebi*) mark important religious celebrations and are represented here as a contrast to the mundane habits of one's customary routine. As genre subjects, these images make a significant commentary on Edo-period life by elucidating the seasonal sequence and its special holidays and occupations.

This set of prints of *The Twelve Months* reflects the intricacy of surface pattern and attention to detail that is so characteristic of Kunisada's work. In addition, the artist's powerful compositions provide an effective means for conveying the passage of the seasons and the yearly calendrical cycle.

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Japanese; Edo

Miniature palanquin, probably 1800s

Exterior: Laquered wood with painted-gilt design and gilt-metal (probably brass) ornaments; Interior: paintings in ink, colors, and gold on paper

Gift of Marshall H. Gould 43.509

This model palanquin would have been used as part of a display of a set of dolls and other items on the Doll Festival (*Hina matsuri*), celebrated on the third day of the third month. In Kunisada's illustration of *The Third Month*, a similar miniature palanquin is partially visible on the far left. A full-size palanquin (*norimono*) is the conveyance in which a high-ranking bride would be carried to her future husband's home. See an example in the adjacent gallery.

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Utagawa Kunisada, Japanese, 1786-1865

Kichizō Tsutaya, Japanese

The Twelfth Month: Making Mochi Cakes (Shiwasu: Mochitsuki),

Twelve Months, 1854

Polychrome woodblock triptych

Gift of Marshall H. Gould 30.039.5



In this final month of the winter season, preparations for New Year festivities are underway with the making of rice cakes (*mochi*). Other symbols of the season are the turtle of long life on the woman's fan in the left panel and the gourds for good luck on the sliding screens behind her.

Utagawa Kunisada, Japanese, 1786-1865

Kichizō Tsutaya, Japanese

Yokogawa Takejiro, 19th century

The Eleventh Month: The Cock's Fair (Shimotsuki: Tori no machi),

Twelve Months, 1854

Polychrome woodblock triptych

Gift of Marshall H. Gould 30.039.1



These women are dressed warmly to protect themselves from the winter cold. The woman on the right carries a rake decorated with an *otafuku* mask, associated with the coming New Year celebration.

Utagawa Kunisada, Japanese, 1786-1865

Kichizō Tsutaya, Japanese

Yokogawa Takejiro, 19th century

The tenth month (Indian summer): First snow (Koharu: hatsuyuki), *The Twelve Months*, 1854

Polychrome woodblock print

Gift of Marshall H. Gould 30.039.2



Although the traditional name for the tenth month (*Koharu*) refers to what Americans call "Indian summer," the artist has chosen instead to represent the light snow of the early winter season.

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Utagawa Kunisada, Japanese, 1786-1865

Kichizō Tsutaya, Japanese

The Ninth Month: Chrysanthemum (?; character illegible) Party in the Ninth Month (Choyo: Kiku (?) no tsuki utage), Twelve Months, 1854

Polychrome woodblock triptych

Gift of Marshall H. Gould 30.039.4



The Chrysanthemum Festival (*Kiku no sekku*) occurs on the ninth day of the ninth month. The preparations for a celebration may be inferred by the arrival of performers with puppets.

Utagawa Kunisada, Japanese, 1786-1865

Kichizō Tsutaya, Japanese

Yokogawa Takejiro, 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



This moonlit scene is set against a background of autumn grasses. The seasonal plants and the full moon together indicate that this is the plain of Musashi (Musashino) in the vicinity of Edo (modern-day Tokyo).

Utagawa Kunisada, Japanese, 1786-1865

Kichizō Tsutaya, Japanese

Yokogawa Takejiro, 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



As autumn begins, these women seek to escape the heat on a veranda above the river, while other residents of the city cool themselves by boating in the moonlight.

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Utagawa Kunisada, Japanese, 1786-1865
Kichizō Tsutaya, Japanese
Yokogawa Takejiro, 19th century
The sixth month: Summer airing of clothes (Minazuki: doyoboshi), *The Twelve Months*, 1854
Polychrome woodblock print
Gift of Marshall H. Gould 30.039.8



The casual dress of the woman at center and the watermelon in the foreground testify to the heat of this last and warmest month of summer.

Utagawa Kunisada, Japanese, 1786-1865
Kichizō Tsutaya, Japanese
Yokogawa Takejiro, 19th century
The Fifth Month: The Ikebana Gathering (Satsuki: Ikebana no kai), *The Twelve Months (Junikagetsu no uchi)*, 1854
Polychrome woodblock triptych
Gift of Marshall H. Gould 30.039.7



Flower-arranging (*ikebana*) is the subject of this composition. The presence of the iris in the left panel is appropriate because it blooms in the fifth month.

Utagawa Kunisada, Japanese, 1786-1865
Kichizō Tsutaya, Japanese
The Fourth Month: The first cuckoo (Uzuki: Hatsu hototogisu), *The Twelve Months*, 1854
Polychrome woodblock print
Gift of Marshall H. Gould 30.039.3



The cleaning of a fish is the focus of the central panel of this busy kitchen scene.

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Utagawa Kunisada, Japanese, 1786-1865

Kichizō Tsutaya, Japanese

Yokogawa Takejiro, 19th century

The third month: The Doll Festival (Yayoi: Hina matsuri), The Twelve Months, 1854

Polychrome woodblock print

Gift of Marshall H. Gould 30.039.11



The Doll Festival (*Hina matsuri*) is celebrated on the third day of the third month, a time when the peach trees are blooming. The usual display of dolls and other miniature objects is suggested on the left, where a tiny palanquin is partially visible on a shelf. A miniature palanquin is on view in the case in the middle of this gallery.

Utagawa Kunisada, Japanese, 1786-1865

Kichizō Tsutaya, Japanese

[The Second Month] Seasonal Change of Clothes: Plum Viewing (Koromogae umemi), Twelve Months, 1854

Polychrome woodblock triptych

Gift of Marshall H. Gould 30.039.10



The lunar calendar begins with spring, which usually falls around the end of January or early February. These women are enjoying the second month of spring by picnicking under a flowering cherry tree, characteristic of the season.

Utagawa Kunisada, Japanese, 1786-1865

Kichizō Tsutaya, Japanese

The First Month: First Dance of the New Year (Moshun: Odorizome), Twelve Months, 1854

Polychrome woodblock triptych

Gift of Marshall H. Gould 30.039.12



A performance by two dancers and a *samisen* player marks the arrival of the lunar New Year. The presence of pines in the background also alludes to this festival.