

RISD MUSEUM

Reading Japanese Prints, September 5, 2003-November 30, 2003

The visual arts present a paradox. We look at the very picture created by an artist (or, in this case, a team of artists and craftsmen) and observed by viewers centuries ago; but ignorance of the artist's and viewer's culture often prevents us from noticing the visual clues that gave the pictures full meaning in their land of origin.

On the most basic level, Japanese prints usually contain a text that identifies the artist and the ostensible subject. They might also include a verse or explanation that adds another unexpected dimension to the print. Who, at first glance, would associate Hiroshige's striking fan print of chrysanthemums (acc. no. 34.305) with an ancient Chinese myth?

Important cultural information was often coded in the costumes, hairstyles, and gestures of figures in the prints. Prominent crests on their robes identified kabuki actors (acc. no. 20.1056) and certain patterns were associated with particular roles. An abundance of large hairpins would identify a woman in an early 19th-century print as a high-ranking courtesan. Other meanings were often concealed, and many prints were visual puzzles that challenged their viewers' ingenuity and imagination.

The Tōkaidō was a highway that connected the city of Edo (where all the prints in this exhibition were produced) and the ancient capital of Kyoto. Pictures of activities and places along this road were very popular in the 19th century, and artists quickly created stereotypes for some of the stations. Hiroshige, in the early 1830s, created the standard representation of a procession setting out from Nihonbashi Bridge. By the middle of the century, artists often played against these stereotypes. Kunisada, for example, shows a child holding a doll of a figure in one of these processions that Hiroshige obliquely matches with an inset view of the pilings of the bridge.

The meaning of some of the clues in these prints has been lost. There is no way to know why Usuyukihime is carrying toys attached to sheaves of rice in Kiyomitsu's print (acc. no. 20.1073) because the libretto for this performance no longer exists. Autumn is the season in which rice is harvested, but it is impossible to tell whether the love interest in the poem was the woman in the picture, her lover, the handsome young actor himself, or all three. Japanese poetry allows a great deal of ambiguity and suggestion, and this esthetic was wholeheartedly adopted by many artists who designed prints.

Each work in this exhibition contains more than meets the eye, and in the time between the creation of the earliest and latest prints on view here, the richness of allusion and coding became more and more complicated. This increasing intellectual complexity is precisely mirrored in the greater saturation of color and richness of pattern and design in the mid-19th-century Japanese prints.

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CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Katsushika Hokusai, Japanese, 1760-1849

Tōshirō Katano, Japanese

Random sketches by Hokusai: Vol. 8, 1812-1849

woodblock printed book with paper wrappers, sewn

Gift of the Estate of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 31.394.8

In this illustration of an old tale, several blind men examine an elephant and then disagree over its appearance. Those who touched its tail declared that the elephant was like a rope. Those who touched its leg insisted that it was like a tree trunk, and so forth.

Utagawa Hiroshige, Japanese, 1797-1858

Utagawa Kunisada, Japanese, 1786-1865

Maruya Kyushiro, Japanese

Fujisawa, The fifty-three stations [of the Tokaido] by twin brushes, 1854.7

Polychrome wood block print with embossing

Bequest of Isaac C. Bates 13.2320

Kunisada drew the figures and Hiroshige drew the inset landscapes for this set of prints. Fujisawa lies between Edo (modern Tokyo) and the Hakone mountains. The woman may represent Hatsuhana, a young woman in the play *The Cripple's Revenge* (Izari no katakiuchi) who pulled her crippled husband through this area on just such a cart on their way to a temple in Hakone. There she prayed successfully for his recovery.



Utagawa Kunisada, Japanese, 1786-1865

Japanese

Genshoku

Daikokuya, Japanese

Visiting Komachi (Kayoi Komachi), Parody of the seven [Ono no] Komachi, 1847-1852

Polychrome woodblock print

Helen M. Danforth Acquisition Fund 2003.39.1



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In one of the legends about the life of the beautiful 9th-century poetess Ono no Komachi, it is related that at the end of summer, she told a young man that she would accept him as a lover if he visited her for one hundred consecutive nights without fail. He came and went (the palanquin represents his travels), but as winter drew on he fell ill, and on the ninety-ninth night he died. Kunisada combines this incident with an episode from an 11th-century novel *The Tale of Genji* by Lady Murasaki. Therein is recounted the story of a young woman named Yūgao (Moonflower), who lives in the countryside. She identifies herself to Prince Genji by presenting him with her namesake flower on a fan. Genji is charmed and takes her as a lover, with tragic consequences.

Utagawa Hiroshige, Japanese, 1797-1858

Utagawa Kunisada, Japanese, 1786-1865

Maruya Kyushiro, Japanese

Yokogawa Horitake, Japanese

Nihonbashi, The fifty-three stations [of the Tokaido] by twin brushes,

1854.7

Polychrome wood block print

Bequest of Isaac C. Bates 13.2328

The city of Edo (now called Tokyo), where all the prints in this exhibition were produced, was connected by a highway (the Tōkaidō) with the ancient capital of Kyoto. Pictures of activities and places along this road were very popular in the 19th century, and artists quickly created stereotypes for some of the stations. *Daimyō* (feudal lords) often set out from the Nihonbashi Bridge in the center of Edo when they departed the city to return to their domains. In the early 1830s, Hiroshige created the standard representation of a lordly procession going forth from this bridge. By the middle of the century, artists often played their own images against such stereotypes.

Kunisada shows a child holding a doll that represents a *yakko* (servant) from one of these processions, which Hiroshige obliquely matches with an inset view of the pilings of the Nihonbashi Bridge.



RISD MUSEUM

Utagawa Kunisada, Japanese, 1786-1865

Iseya Rihei, Japanese

The lovers Komurasaki and Gompachi, from the Odori Village scene of the play Meguro hiyokutsuka, A collection of joruri libretti Joruri zukushi, ca. 1832

Polychrome wood block

Bequest of Isaac C. Bates 13.1385

The courtesan wears a typically elaborate coiffure and costume decorated with stripes representing the bars on her window with geese flying outside the brothel. Komurasaki, the heroine of the Edo puppet play *The Grave at Meguro*, was a 17th-century courtesan who escaped from the pleasure district and joined her lover Gompachi, like the sparrows darting in and out of the bars on another part of the costume in the print. After their sad deaths, Komurasaki and Gompachi were compared to a pair of "couple birds," who can only fly together since each has a single wing and one eye. The two were buried together at a temple in Meguro.



Suzuki Harunobu, Japanese, 1724-1770

Walking in the rain (Ame), ca. 1767

Polychrome wood block print

Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 20.1080

Harunobu designed several early prints in which a woman's attendant looks back toward someone outside the picture. This print may allude to a story about the famous 9th-century poetess Ono no Komachi, who ended a long drought by composing a prayer for rain in verse. Little is known about the facts of Komachi's life, but many legends surround her name.



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Hosoda Eishi, Japanese, 1756-1829

Nishimuraya Yohachi, Japanese

Nyosan no Miya, An abridgement in three sheets, mid 1790's

Polychrome woodblock print

Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 20.1136

The subject of the print is a scene from the 11th-century classic novel by Lady Murasaki, *The Tale of Genji*, which Eishi sets in the 1790s.

One spring day, Prince Genji's young son Kashiwagi accidentally kicked his football against a bamboo blind in the Imperial Palace. A tiny cat sprang out to investigate, and Kashiwagi caught a glimpse of its owner, Princess Nyosan no Miya. The couple eventually became lovers, with tragic consequences.



Kitagawa Utamaro, Japanese, 1754-1806

Omiya Gonkuro, Japanese, 18th century

A parody (mitate) of Act 5 of Chūshingura (Treasury of the Loyal Retainers) with a courtesan of the Naniwaya (go-danme (Act 5) Naniwaya (inscribed to l. of figure), Chushingura parodied by famous beauties: a set of 12 prints, ca. 1794-1795

Polychrome woodblock print

Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 20.1145

The Treasury of Loyal Retainers is the dramatization of the story of 47 samurai (*rōnin*) who avenge their master's death. On a dark, rainy night in Act 5, Ono no Sadakurō, a bandit dressed in black, steals a gold-filled pouch from an old man he meets in a grove of pine trees along the road. In the print on view, a popular teahouse waitress named Okita (the woman in black) represents the outlaw; the potted tree symbolizes the pine grove; and the laundress (whose shaved eyebrows indicate that she is a widow) represents the old man whose purse was stolen.



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Keisai Eisen, Japanese, 1790-1848

The fickle type: Takanawa (Uwakiso takanawa), from the series
Twelve Views of Modern Beauties (Imayo bijin junikei), 1820s

Polychrome woodblock print

Bequest of Isaac C. Bates 13.1387

A young woman glances toward a lover as she disengages two sheets of tissue paper with her teeth to tidy herself. Takanawa, a harbor district on the southern edge of Edo (modern Tokyo), was famous during the 19th century for its teahouses, bars, and unlicensed prostitution. This series matched women's personality types with familiar sites in the city of Edo.



Utagawa Kuniyoshi, Japanese, 1797-1861

Ibayashi Sensaburo, Japanese, 19th century

Scribblings on the storehouse wall (Nitakaragura kabe no mudagaki),
1843-1847

Polychrome woodblock print

Gift of Roger S. Keyes and Elizabeth Coombs 1998.72.7

Kuniyoshi designed this print during the period between 1847 and the early 1850s, when the government forbade the publication of actor portraits. The faces of the actors are recognizable, and among the graffiti their names appear as rebuses, visual puzzles in which the words for the images portrayed have a second meaning when spoken together. The pagoda (tō) and elephant (zō) at the lower left, for example, identify the actor Azuma Tōzō.



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Torii Kiyomitsu I, Japanese, ca. 1735-1785

Yamashiroya, Japanese

Segawa Kikunojo II as the princess Usuyukihime (Nidai Segawa Kikunojo Usuyukihime), ca. 1760

Polychrome woodblock print

Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 20.1073

The actor's costume is decorated with skeins of cotton thread, a repetition of the pattern of his black-and-white identifying crest. He plays Princess Usuyuki, who is carrying sheaves of rice to which children's toys are attached: a pinwheel, drums, and a toy trumpet. Written for the print, the verse reads: "So many kinds of love amid the autumn fields!" Autumn is the season in which rice is harvested, but it is impossible to tell whether the love interest in the unsigned poem is the woman in the picture, her lover, the handsome young actor himself, or all three. The significance of the toys is also unknown, as no copy now exists of the libretto for this play, probably a pantomime with chanted accompaniment.



Nishimura Shigenaga, Japanese, ca. 1697-1756

Omiya Kyuhei, Japanese

The actors Ichimura Takenojo as Kudo Suketsune and Sanjo Kantaro as the princess Tatsuhime in the play Hinazuru unagasu Soga performed at the Ichimura Theatre 1722.11, late 1730s

Polychrome wood block print

Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 20.1064

Suketsune is the villain in the popular story of the revenge of the Soga brothers. Plays based on this tale were performed annually at most kabuki theaters during the 18th century. The butterfly under the black color on Kantaro's robe is the emblem of the younger Soga brother, Gorō. It is also, coincidentally, Kantaro's identifying crest.



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Okumura Masanobu, Japanese, 1686-1764

Okumuraya Genroku, Japanese

Ichikawa Ebizo II as a priest; Ōtani Hiroji as a priest; Segawa Kikunojo as a Shirabyoshi (performer); a scene from Momochidori musume Dojoji (a myriad of birds: the maiden of Dojoji Temple), part of the play Sazareishi Hirogenji, the New Year's performance 振, *Perspective pictures of theater stages, ca. 1744*

polychrome woodblock print with hand applied color

Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 20.1056



The Nakamura Theater was a famous venue for kabuki plays.

Momochidori musume dōjōji, the kabuki play onstage, is a drama of unrequited love. Ichikawa Ebizō II and Ōtani Hiroji play the monks guarding a temple bell. Segawa Kikunōjō plays Kiyohime, the woman who seeks the object of her affection, a third monk hiding inside the bell. The crests on their robes identify the actors.

Utagawa Kuniyoshi, Japanese, 1797-1861

Ibayashi Sensaburo, Japanese, 19th century

Horiko Sajiro

Kiyotaki of the Kamonoya (Kamonoya kiyotaki), Cascading stripes and the glad fulfillment of earnest prayers, 1843-1847

Polychrome woodblock print

Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 20.1309



The artist matches striped textile patterns with scenes from plays that link waterfalls with prayers. Yukihime's prayer in the kabuki play *Gion sairei shinchōki* was answered when she discovered the lord Daizen was her father's murderer. When Daizen stood beside a waterfall and drew the magic sword he had stolen from her father, a dragon appeared as suddenly as the jet of water squirting from the bulb in the woman's hand.

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Katsukawa Shunshō, Japanese, 1725-1792

Nakamura Nakazo I as "The luminary and leading Rokujuroku Pilgrim in Japan" (Nakamura Nakazo: Nihon ichi Rokujuroku bu kokin meijin), 1780.11

Polychrome woodblock print

Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 20.1102

On his back the pilgrim carries a portable shrine ostensibly containing many copies of the *Lotus Sutra*, which he will be donating to 66 (*rokujūroku*) temples and holy places on his journey. During the Edo period this was a common disguise. The inscription on the box, "An all-time famous person; the greatest pilgrim in Japan," testifies to the actor's great fame and his popularity in this role.



Mori Kansai, Japanese, 1814-1894

Winter Landscape, 1873

Ink, color and gold on silk, versos stenciled in blue

Elizabeth T. and Dorothy N. Casey Fund 2001.16H

The image on the left depicts a scene from the popular and much told story of the Soga brothers. The butterflies on the couple's robes and the leaf design on the young man's armor are the emblems of the younger Soga brother, Gorō, who is dressing for the attack in which he and his older brother Jurō will kill their father's murderer and avenge his death. Shōshō is Gorō's lover. The plovers on her robe also help identify the couple. They are the emblem of Jurō.



There is no obvious relationship between the two facing pictures in the album. The image on the right shows a raccoon dog (*tanuki*) in the moonlight. A shy creature, in folk tales it often tricks people by changing its shape.

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Sumiyoshi

The Tale of Genji, late 1600s

Ink, slight color, gold and gold leaf on paper

Mary B. Jackson Fund, Jesse Metcalf Fund, and Helen M. Danforth

Acquisition Fund 82.103.1



Prince Genji is composing a reply to Yūgao for her gift of moonflowers. The fence in the background covered with a vine of this flower conceals her house. This print comes from an album of verses and illustrations for the 11th-century classic novel *The Tale of Genji* by Lady Murasaki. The illustrations, drawn in black and shades of grey with touches of gold and light color, face verses written on papers with painted gold backgrounds.

Utagawa Hirokage, Japanese, fl. 1855-1865

Bunsuke Tsujikokaya, Japanese

Great battle between the troops of the fish and vegetables (Aomono sakana gunsei daigassen no zu), 1859

Polychrome woodblock print

Gift of Roger S. Keyes and Elizabeth Coombs 1997.90.4



The fish and vegetable soldiers are all dressed in armor. Their names recall those of medieval heroes from warrior tales such as the 13th-century epic *The Tales of Heike*, which chronicles the battles between the Taira and Minamoto clans. The print is meant to be humorous; no social satire or political parody was intended.

Utagawa School, Japanese, 19th century

Utagawa Kuniyoshi, Japanese, 1797-1861

Peonies composed of lion dogs (Fukamigusa shishi no irodori), 1847-1852

Polychrome woodblock print

Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 34.394



Peonies were probably called "deep-view flowers" (*fukamigusa*) because they had so many layers of petals. The verse, signed Hanagaki no Tamajakushi (Tadpole Drawing Flowers by a Flower-Covered Fence), puns on two meanings of the word *hana* ("nose" and "flower"). "How effortlessly the lions [kings of animals], exchange their noses for petals and become peonies [king of flowers]; such opulent abundance in a plant!" Kuniyoshi drew several pictures of composite figures during this period. The tadpole, of course, is another symbol of transformation.

RISD MUSEUM

Torii Kiyotomo, Japanese, fl. 1720-1740s

Actor as a street vendor selling hand towels and scent pouches in the shapes of kimono sleeves (Sanogawa Ichimatsu?), mid-1720s

Polychrome woodblock print

Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 20.1061

The handsome young vendor is selling “fabrics for a loving glance” (*iromesha*). The crests of attractive and popular young kabuki actors decorate his merchandise. His robe shows entrances to houses in a brothel district. The small arrow (representing the syllable *ya*) and the other pictures grouped above the man’s waist are a rebus, or visual representation, of his professional name.



Katsushika Hokusai, Japanese, 1760-1849

Tōshirō Katano, Japanese

One hundred views of Mount Fuji: Vol. 2, 1875

Woodblock printed book with embossed paper covers

Gift of the Estate of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 31.396.2

The luckiest dream on New Year’s Eve was considered to be one that included a hawk (or falcon), Mount Fuji, and an eggplant. Taken together, the images form a rebus. When spoken, the words for the images have a second meaning of “achieve unparalleled success.”

RISD MUSEUM

Torii Kiyonaga, Japanese, 1752-1815

Nishimuraya Yohachi, Japanese

Kintaro riding a bear (Kintaro), 1790s

Polychrome wood block print

Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 20.1125

Kintarō's mother, Yamamba – the legendary "wild woman of the mountains" – left Kyoto to raise her son in the wilderness after her husband abandoned them. Kintarō made friends with the animals and is said to have grown up to be the famous warrior Sakata Kintoki. Prints of Kintarō were popular at the end of the 18th century. They may have been sold as presents for male children on Boy's Day, a yearly holiday.



Utagawa Hiroshige, Japanese, 1797-1858

The everlasting chrysanthemum (Toshigiku), Parody of happiness, luck and longevity with collected flowers, 1843-1847

Polychrome woodblock print

Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 34.305

The inscription explains that the chrysanthemum is also called the Old Man Plant (*okinagusa*) because of its association with Kikujidō (The Boy Who Loved Chrysanthemums), a Chinese youth who, exiled from the Imperial court, found refuge in a remote valley filled with chrysanthemums. He drank their dew and lived for seven hundred years, according to the myth.



Mori Kansai, Japanese, 1814-1894

Eight Immortals, 1873

Ink, color and gold on silk; versos stenciled in blue

Elizabeth T. and Dorothy N. Casey Fund 2001.16B



RISD MUSEUM

Mori Kansai, Japanese, 1814-1894

Summer Landscape, 1873

Ink, color and gold on silk; versos stenciled in blue

Elizabeth T. and Dorothy N. Casey Fund 2001.16C



Mori Kansai, Japanese, 1814-1894

Fruit and a Taihu Rock, 1873

Ink, color, and gold on silk

Elizabeth T. and Dorothy N. Casey Fund 2001.16D



Mori Kansai, Japanese, 1814-1894

Arrowroot Vine, Shrimp, and Fish, 1873

Ink, color, and gold on silk

Elizabeth T. and Dorothy N. Casey Fund 2001.16E



RISD MUSEUM

Mori Kansai, Japanese, 1814-1894
Tanuki (raccoon) with Autumn Moon, 1873
Ink, color and gold on silk; versos stenciled in blue
Elizabeth T. and Dorothy N. Casey Fund 2001.16F



Mori Kansai, Japanese, 1814-1894
Warrior with Armor Turning to Face a Kneeling Woman Holding His Sword, 1873
Ink, color and gold on silk; versos stenciled in blue
Elizabeth T. and Dorothy N. Casey Fund 2001.16G



Mori Kansai, Japanese, 1814-1894
Nuthatcher on a Flowering Cherry Tree, from an *Album of Eight Paintings*, 1873
Ink, colors, and gold on silk
Elizabeth T. and Dorothy N. Casey Fund 2001.16A

