

First-Class Asian Prints

From White Lotus collection

It is unusual and a special delight to find in a town of Eugene's size a venue that offers a window into some of the best art beyond our borders. The White Lotus Gallery, conveniently located near the Hult Center, is unique in Oregon for its representation of internationally-renowned Asian artists and its remarkable collection of first-rate Asian prints. The current exhibition, through July 31, encapsulates the modern history of Asian printmaking.

Woodblock-printing started in China, the earliest-known dated example from AD 868. Japanese artists and craftsmen developed their own distinctive styles and techniques, and, when Japan opened up to the West in mid-19th century, the *ukiyo-e* prints that dominated the Edo (1615-1868) and Meiji (1868-1912) periods greatly influenced European avant-garde artists from Van Gogh to Klimt. In return, in the 1870s, encounters with Western art significantly altered the look of Japanese prints with inclusions of internal shading, cast shadows and aerial perspective.

Ukiyo-e prints resulted from the collaboration of publisher, artist-designer, master-carver and master-printer, and were viewed in Japan as commercial art. See **Toyohara Chikanobu's** *Beauty of the Kanei Era* for a good example of a traditional *ukiyo-e* print. In late Meiji, the *ukiyo-e* tradition became moribund, and craftsmen sometimes resorted to old paintings for their designs as with **Kano Gennobu's** *Bird on a Branch*, which also evidences the extraordinary woodblock-printing skills reached at the time. Gradation of tints, delicacy of line and color, downy texture of feathers, watermark — all might have been achieved with the finest brush.

Two movements in the 1910s renewed woodcuts. *Shin hanga* ("new prints") artists followed much of the *ukiyo-e* tradition (see **Kawase Hasui's** prints), but *Sosaku hanga* ("creative prints") artists, while keeping traditional tools and materials, broke with it. Usually trained in Western-style art, *sosaku hanga* artist-printmakers considered carving and printing part of the creative process, and aimed to create fine art, not illustrations.

Among the *sosaku hanga* woodcuts shown, *The Stone Garden* is for **Hide Kawanishi** an unusually sober composition that beautifully expresses the character of the Zen garden. In *Red Statue*, **Shuzo Ikeda** explores sacred stone-images in a bold, red-over-black scheme. **Chizuko Yoshida**, a member of the famous Yoshida family of printmakers, creates in *Dawn* delicate rainbow tints, one of her hallmarks. Her shading is reminiscent of *ukiyo-e*.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Japanese printmakers started exploring a variety of media, techniques and subject-matters. Woodblock no longer dominated. In 1954, **Yoshitoshi Mori**, a designer of kimono patterns, transferred the stencil-printing technique (*kappazuri*) from textile to paper. His thatched-roofed *Farm House*, with its earthy pigments and bold lines, reflects his involvement in the revival of folk-art traditions.

Some artists developed idiosyncratic methods. **Haku Maki**, a master of abstract composition, developed a complex method combining woodblock and cement work. *Work 74-47*, which can be read as an abstract landscape, juxtaposes embossed white (cement) and smooth black (woodblock) below a cloud-like spatter of black on white. With stark elegance, *Poem 70-29*, features altered *kanji* characters (Chinese ideograms) embossed on a pure black ground with two acrylic-painted accents, one blue, one yellow —

all characteristic of Maki's work.

Hiroyuki Tajima's elaborate technique involves an additive process as he first augments his woodblock with paper, shellac and lacquer — or any other materials as in a collagraph — to build up a relief image. He also combines oil-based and water-based inks to create the distinctive crater-like texture of the butterfly in *Memories A*. The deep, rich, luminous colors of his complex, abstract surfaces with their Zen-influenced sense of space, result from his use of a resist-process together with conventional printing techniques.

In *Tabi 15*, **Kunio Kaneko** combines a transferred photograph of a group of standing military officers and their wives seated in front, and white-on-white woodblock-embossed *tabi* (traditional socks) with gold leaf highlights to create a spare composition starkly evocative of a not-so-distant but forever-gone past. **Tetsuya Noda** developed a method involving photographic

are rendered ambiguously without eyes or noses, in keeping with Zen concepts of simplicity and suggestion, but with prominent, woodblock-printed red lips. Western garments sport bright motifs and patterns as kimonos might.

In *Disguise II*, an androgynous figure is shown exiting a frame within the picture, holding a mustache in one hand. As usual, the design is bold, based in part on contrasting three different areas: single-color, patterns of color and areas textured by hatching and cross-hatching. Hiratsuka's intaglios are reduction etchings. The artist burnishes and re-etches a single copper plate for his four-color prints. Only one edition is thus possible. (The same method in linocuts is known as "suicide prints.")

Toko Shinoda, one of Japan's foremost calligraphers, is celebrated worldwide for her abstract paintings and lithographs. Her spare abstract compositions embody the principles Zen aesthetics. They are based on a few powerful calligraphic strokes — long and thin like blades, broad angled wedges, overlapping translucent layers. Their subject-matter is also calligraphically inscribed in *hiragana* — this

Xun also introduced the work of social-activist printmakers Käthe Kollwitz and Frans Masereel to Chinese artists.) Later woodcuts became Mao's favorite propaganda tool, and, sadly, the old prints and woodblocks were destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. The popular Chinese print was revived in the 1980s, though. Some artists and artisans studied printmaking in Japan, and several Chinese artisan centers emerged. Printmaking as a means for individual artistic expression also took off in the 1980s.

Li Yi-Tai, who has shown worldwide, produces exquisite landscapes for which he uses a 300-years-old Chinese water-based technique that demands great skill and results in a water-color effect. Water prints require thin paper — Li uses mulberry — moistened at a precise level of humidity before printing. *Li River* exemplifies Li's masterful use of wood-grain texture. Western perspective provides a discrete new slant to the traditional subject of mountains reflected in water.

Zhu Wei-Ming focuses on "water-towns" on China's eastern coast, showing these villages unchanged by modern life. His are gouache woodblocks (*feyin muke*), a technique that involves printing "thick layers of rich opaque colors against a dark or colored background using several woodblock plates, allowing him to control the texture's density." In *Snow is Coming*, snow falls at night on a traditional dwelling and a moored boat. The overall impression of peace and coziness is reinforced, paradoxically, by the complex texture and strong lines.

Li Yan-Peng's technique of reduction woodblock printing was first developed in China in the 1980s. The process entails re-carving the block after each color is printed, making further editions impossible. The skills involved are all the more noteworthy when one looks at *Big Goats*, a large-format, realistic rendering of a herd of goats next to a rocky outcrop, all in earth-tones. Also remarkable is the artist's ability to modulate the weight and direction of his dynamic hatched cuts.

Su Xin-Ping achieved international stature with his lithographs. Both *Horse and Shadow* and *Wall* exhibit a subtle, playful, yet somewhat disquieting, element of surrealism. The first provides a realistically-rendered horse with a stylized, cartoon-like shadow; the other, an elongated ghost-silhouette of a horse against a curving wall. The delicate hatching and craftsmanship are superb.

Two of Su's highly sought-after oil paintings are also displayed, both depicting scenes from his native Mongolia. In *Outlook*, a young woman wearing a traditional dress gazes behind her, her figure lit with a warm glow against a tall night sky, her pensive expression arresting. *Horizon* juxtaposes two worlds: a girl in traditional dress running, her arms extended as wings, while low in the sky a modern passenger-jet flies by. The eerie atmosphere of the paintings expresses well the feeling of strangeness of those who straddle two worlds.

Two local artists are also represented. **Jamie Newton's** abstract acrylic, *Direction*, relies on bold calligraphic strokes, strength of composition and a sober palette. **Nancy Pobanz's** *Resistance* involves, as always with this artist, a complex array of organic materials, notably pigments from Oregon desert and mountains. The result is an elegant, abstract composition in earth-tones.

These treasures at the White Lotus Gallery should not be missed. They provide a tantalizing idea of the rest of the works available at the gallery. Knowledgeable amateurs will rejoice in the quality of the art, while the exhibit also serves as a beautiful introduction for those new to the world of Asian art.



Tabi 15, Mixed-media print by Kunio Kaneko

images, silkscreen and woodblock-printing for his visual "diaries," such as *Diary: September 16, 1989*, which all record moments in the artist's life.

Some Japanese printmakers were drawn to Western printmaking techniques, eschewing woodcuts altogether. **Ryohei Tanaka** is justly renowned for his serene, meticulously accurate etchings of rural western Japan, its thatched farmhouses, fields, delicately-branching trees. He is a master of texture: straw, grass, twigs, wood, tile, stone, slatted-windows, latticed-screens. All are etched with exquisite subtlety. Texture is often the basis for his compositions, which then acquire an almost abstract quality.

Yuji Hiratsuka, who teaches at OSU, is well-known in this country, where he's lived since 1985. His etchings bring together aspects of East and West, the traditional and the contemporary. They inherit their colorfulness, humor and a caricature element from the *ukiyo-e* tradition. Faces

cursive syllabary, which she alters slightly without compromising its readability — becomes in turn an integral part of the design. Negative space is another composition element taken into consideration. Perfect asymmetric balance is achieved, and an impression of atemporality created. *Snow, Flower, Moon* shows how Shinoda is able to exquisitely control differences in subtle grey tones so hard to obtain in printmaking, allowing light to show through them.

The tradition of popular Chinese prints can be traced back to the Tang Dynasty (618-907 AD) and thrived until 1911, with subjects including religion, landscapes, events, Chinese opera and literature. As with Japanese *ukiyo-e*, Chinese prints were the product of teamwork involving artist, carver and printer. In the 1930s, the Creative Print Movement founded by the writer Lu Xun produced woodcut-prints as cheap, efficient tools to spread ideology, using European mass-production printmaking techniques. (Lu