

Japanese Popular Culture

From the floating world to nonsense machines

Part One of Two

An exceptional combination of five remarkable exhibits at two different venues currently affords viewers a rare opportunity to explore the world of Japanese popular culture from the early 18th century to the current avant-garde. Viewers will also examine some of the ways in which Japanese and Western art forms have informed each other over the centuries.

The two complementary venues are the UO Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art and the White Lotus gallery. Besides its Japanese room dedicated to the museum's own collection of Japanese artifacts, the JSMA currently showcases four different exhibits focusing on Japan.

During the Edo period in Japan (1603-1867), under the military rule of the Tokugawa shogunate, the new capital Edo (now Tokyo) grew from a fishermen's village into a city of more than a million inhabitants. Urbanization fostered the development of a money economy with flourishing trade and banking, the rise of the merchant class and the emergence of a new distinct urban culture (*chônindô*, "the way of townspeople").

For the first time, townspeople (*chônin*) had enough leisure to enjoy a booming world of entertainment that included kabuki and puppet theaters, teahouses, festivals and the brothel district, all of which attracted customers from all walks of life. This ephemeral world of pleasure and escapism became known in the 17th century as *ukiyo*, the floating world. The term *ukiyo* also connoted the Buddhist concept of illusory reality.

The mass culture that accompanied the rise of the lower social classes found its expression in a new commercial artform, the woodblock print. Although the term *ukiyo-e* ("picture of the floating world") also included paintings, woodblock prints were the cheapest, most popular and most versatile medium. Paintings were for the elite classes, prints for everyone else. Ranging from cheap black-and-white images to luxurious designs, they were suitable for mass production.

"Inside the Floating World: Japanese Prints from the Lenoir C. Wright Collection" (JSMA), is a traveling exhibition organized by the Weatherspoon Art Museum (North Carolina) and curated by Allen Hockley, art historian at Dartmouth College. Its 100 thematically grouped prints by prominent artists span the entire history of the *ukiyo-e*, providing a superb overview of the tradition.

Exhibit designer Kurt Neugebauer masterfully set the stage with a wide Prussian blue frieze that visually lowers the ceiling and ensures that the small white-matted

prints are not lost against a huge white wall. A traditional orange carp-streamer (loaned by Dr. Lee Michels) floats delightfully against this luminous blue echoed in many of the prints. At regular intervals, the tall verticals of *hashira-e* (pillar prints) posters break the horizontal space and impart rhythm to the installation.

The earliest prints displaying *ukiyo-e* topics date from the early 17th century. These

intended market: while inexpensive editions and book illustrations used three to five colors, luxury prints could require up to 30 blocks.

Print production involved a threefold division of labor. The *Ukiyo-e* artist designed a preparatory brush drawing (*shita-e*) that was then traced on very thin paper. The master-carver pasted this *hanshita-e* (block design) faced down onto a cherry-wood block and carved through the paper, leaving the design



Eizan of the Takeya, by Chôkôsai Eishô c. 1790s, on loan from the Weatherspoon Art Museum, The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, gift of Dr. Lenoir C. Wright, 1967.

black-and-white prints (*sumizuri-e*) were often hand-colored. The simplicity of their design and their flowing lines recall those of paintings. Masanobu's depiction of a man dreaming of a "poison prostitute spider" is a wonderful example of this early style.

In the 1740s, printing was done in two colors (*benizuri-e*). Full-color prints, *nishiki-e* ("brocade prints"), took over in 1765. The number of color blocks depended on the

outlines in high relief to create a key-block. Assistants carved separate blocks for each color. Guide marks (*kento*) were carved on each block to ensure the drawing and colors would register correctly on each print. Samples of key- and color-blocks are displayed together with a set of traditional tools.

Printers used paper handmade from *kôzo* (mulberry) and, originally, traditional translu-

cent vegetal and inorganic pigments with uneven lightfastness. By the mid-1860s, aniline dyes (synthesized in England in the 1850s) became widely used. Their intensity was viewed by many critics and collectors as a symptom of garish decadence, but they were popular and many considered them a sign of modernization and progress. The better printmakers knew to use them cautiously and to good effect.

Subject-matter in *ukiyo-e* reflected the interests of the Edo population of the time and provided a wide-range depiction of the contemporary urban world of the merchant and craft classes. Most themes are represented here – to the exclusion of the highly popular erotic *shunga* prints ("images of spring").

Ukiyo-e chronicled every aspect of the highly-ritualized Kabuki world, from dressing-rooms and backstage areas to actors on stage in stylized poses and theatrical expressions. Kunisada's triptych, *Interior of the Morita-za Kabuki Theater*, details not only the setting but the socially diverse audience while actors on stage play the third act of *Shibaraku*, a traditional season-opener.

Climactic moments were abundantly illustrated in colorful, dramatic compositions and stylized designs. A popular play such as *Chûshingura* (*A Treasury of Loyal Retainers*) prompted series of eleven prints (one per act). By the 1770s, settings became more detailed and bust-portraits (*ôkubi-e*) offered close-up views of leading actors, highlighting their unique features.

The other dominant genre was the *bijinga*, pictures of beautiful women from all walks of life – though most were courtesans, who were considered models of refinement and elegance. *Ukiyo-e* artists kept up with, and documented, the rapidly changing fashions in clothing, hairstyles and ornaments, as well as the ever-evolving conception of ideal beauty. Thus the sturdy capable woman of the early 17th century turns in the 1760s into a slender delicate adolescent baring her nape enticingly before maturing in the 19th century into a lofty beauty in increasingly complex and monumental hairstyles.

The women depicted were idealized types, not individuals. Garments, hairstyles and held objects indicated class and occupation. Courtesans were identified by their name and that of the brothel they belonged to, not by any personal features. Vertical diptychs (*kakemono-e*) provided affordable alternatives to the paintings of courtesans commissioned by wealthy patrons. The *bijinga* also extended its owner vicarious enjoyment of the floating world.

Japan possessed the highest literacy rate in the pre-modern world, and classical literature and poetry also supplied the *ukiyo-e* artist with themes and characters. The latter included the poets themselves, such as Ono