

Japanese Popular Culture

From the floating world to nonsense machines

Part Two

An exceptional combination of five remarkable exhibits at two 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 — as well as to 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.

The "Nineteenth-Century Japanese Woodblock Prints" exhibit at the White Lotus Gallery showcases a fraction of the gallery's collection of *ukiyo-e*. With its focus on prints from the second half of the 19th century and on the twin themes of kabuki actors and *bijin*, beautiful women, it both prolongs and complements the JSMA show. Artists who appear in both exhibits include Chikanobu, Kunichika, Kunisada and Yoshitoshi.

The show includes a number of Osaka prints (Yoshitaki, Hironobu). Osaka prints dealt almost exclusively with kabuki themes and favored the smaller *chûban* format to the larger *ôban* size preferred by Edo artists. Osaka prints are known for their controlled designs, harmonious colors, superior engraving and printing techniques, and high-quality materials. They also portray a softer style of acting.

"We've used colored mats, which museums can't do, because our prints are meant for decorative purposes and are priced to that effect," gallery owner Dick Easley said. "These are not rare prints, but they are particularly good examples of 19th century *ukiyo-e*, including *ôban* diptychs and triptychs and *chûban* Osaka prints.

Ginko presents a propagandist view of the Sino-Japanese war, during which he worked as war correspondent and illustrator. The de-

sign of his triptych shows the influence of Western-style painting, which he studied. Next to it, Chikanobu's triptych provides a wonderful rural counterpoint as farmers rush toward a poacher whose hawk captured a crane.

Back at the JSMA, "Art and Everyday Life in Japan" in the Preble/Murphy wing showcases *ukiyo-e* from the collection of Dr. Lee Michels, Vice-President of the JSMA Board of Directors. These prints, mostly from the latter half of the 19th century, focus on the simple pleasures of life in Edo. Here we find

(carp streamers) float from tall poles and eaves.

And then there is the entertainment only a city can provide. A triptych provides an exterior view of the Morita Theater. Customers browse in a print shop displaying the very same Kunisada's portraits of kabuki actors that now hang at the White Lotus.

Because the *ukiyo-e* represented a commercial venture, they were not appreciated as a genuine art form in Japan until Western artists and collectors cast them in that light. Japanese prints had a profound influence on such



artists, she juxtaposes the organic motifs of kimonos and the geometric designs of architecture, but her treatment of space and garments remains Western, and people's postures are stiff.

Helen Hyde (1868-1919) studied art in America and Europe. Her initial ambition was to be an illustrator. She resided in Tokyo and for many years studied printing techniques. She adopted a Japanese lifestyle. Hers is a world of women and children only, depicted with a free, fluid, suggestive line, to which patterns and subtly-tinted details are subordinated. Her sense of composition, rhythm and movement rivals that of Japanese masters, and that strength rescues her prints from their excessively charming scenes.

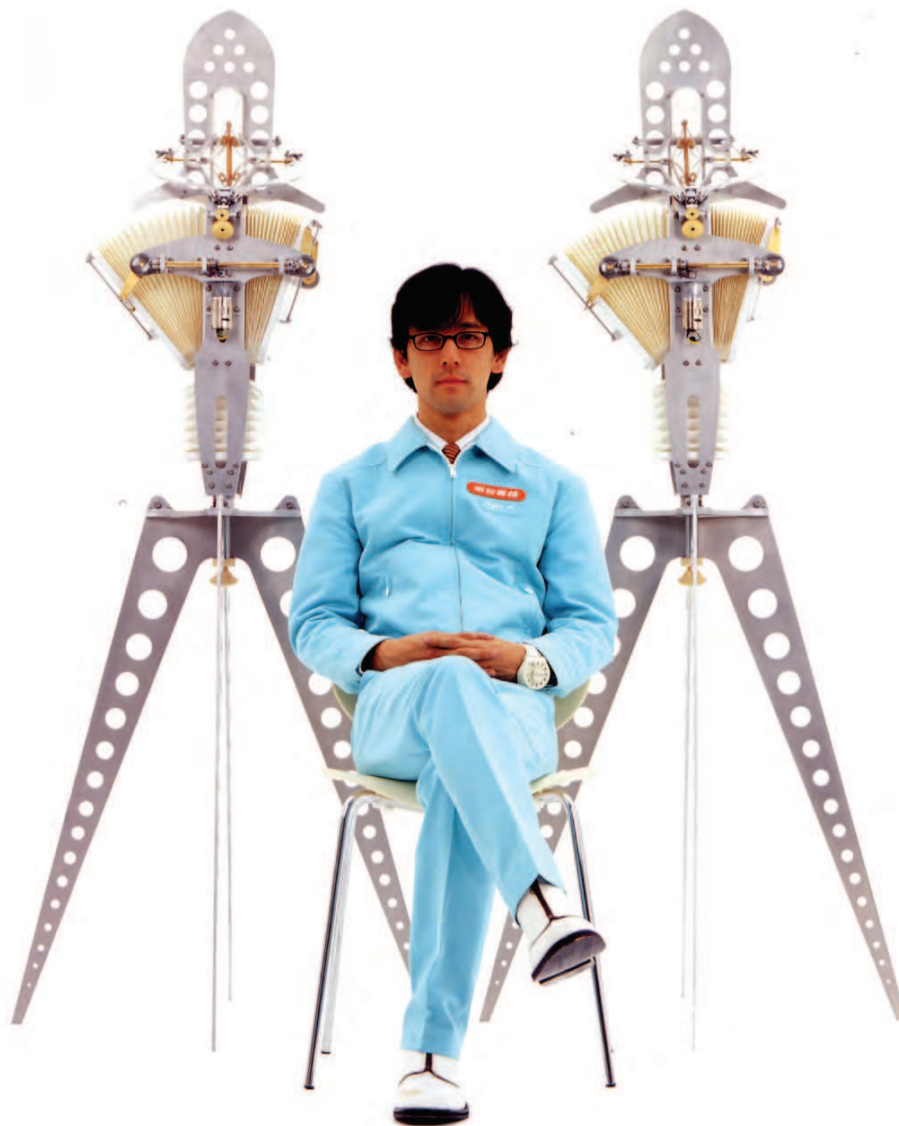
Bertha Lum's (1869-1954) designs are highly stylized, privileging contours, often with few or no details. Her prints are at their best when they are all about atmospheric color, and Lachman selected them well. The set of progressive impressions for *Temple Gate* could be still frames from a film, each showing the various elements of the scene — trees, gate, silhouettes under yellow umbrellas — slowly emerging out of the fog and rain of an early evening. Some prints seem bathed in liquid light, and she excels at having the yellow warmth of a lantern light radiate through the cool atmosphere of a bluish dusk.

Charles W. Bartlett's (1860-1940) prints are all landscapes, often in bright, transparent colors. His designs are stripped of all but essential details, with strong outlines and flat areas of colors. One delightful exception — and his most Western work — is *Kobe*, a crowded street scene in the evening. The vertical composition is accentuated by the two telephone poles framing the scene and by dense vertical hatch-lines. The circular motifs of umbrellas and lanterns gently interrupt this pattern. The night's dark luminous blue is enlivened with the reds and yellows of lanterns and kimonos.

iona rozeal brown's (born 1966) silkscreens derive from her "a3" ("afro-asiatic allegory") painting series. This series is informed by hip-hop (brown is a DJ) and the *ganguro* ("black face") subculture of Japanese youths who borrowed images from African-American culture without knowing any of its history. Brown in turn appropriates their interpretation of her own culture and combines it with *japonisme*, a Western borrowing from Japanese culture... Brown's courtesan has painted her skin black and sports an Afro-Japanese hairstyle. Her male counterpart wears the exaggerated expression of a kabuki actor. The corn-rows on one side of his head echo the pattern on his kimono.

"Maywa Denki: Nonsense Machines Naki (JSMA)"

In 1993 in Tokyo, the young Tosa brothers re-opened their father's defunct vacuum-tube factory as an "art unit" of "parallel-world



(Above, center) Maywa Denki ©Yoshimoto Kogyo Co., Ltd./Maywa Denki photo credit: Jun Mitsuhashi
(Above, right) A Windy Ride, woodblock print by Helen Hyde
(Lower Left) Temple Gate, woodblock print by Bertha Lum.

mothers and children at play or watching sparrows on a *Daruma* snowman, and boys being boys or practicing sumo. A samurai family goes whale-watching, the father sporting a wicker backpack. These are intimate pleasures.

My favorite in this category is Yoshitoshi's peasant couple seated on a mat with their back to us, the husband propped on one elbow, watching the moon contentedly. There is no stylization here. The couple is real. Lines are swift and light as if sketched in pen and ink.

Gathering Shells, a lovely triptych by Hiroshige II, portrays well-to-do women at the beach. Behind them, cresting waves echo the shape of Mt Fuji in the background.

Everyone shares in celebrating seasonal festivals. Crowds enjoy cherry blossoms, fireworks and a walk on New Year's Day. On Boys' Day (now Children's Day), *koi noburi*

artists as Manet, Degas, Van Gogh, Toulouse-Lautrec, Gauguin, Monet, Cassatt, Klimt and on the whole Art Nouveau movement. This craze for things Japanese was dubbed *japonisme* by a French critic. Other Western artists went further, however, and chose to express themselves in the traditional Japanese woodblock print medium.

Happily, the JSMA Murray Warner collection includes a large number of such prints produced by Western artists, and curator Charles Lachman assembled a delightful sample for "Ukiyo-e Outside In: Western Impressions of the Floating World."

All five of the artists represented traveled to Japan. **Elizabeth Keith** (1887-1956) was self-taught, and hers is the most personal style. Her protagonists are individuals: children, craftsmen, actors, people involved in everyday activities. Her tones are subtle and her color schemes varied. Like Japanese

