

Pictures of the Floating World: Ukiyo-e Woodblock Prints

Background Notes

Dr Meri Arichi - 23 January 2019



“New Year’s pattern for kimono” by Isoda Koryusai, c.1780



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Early Woodblock Printing

The technique of woodblock printing was widely used in East Asia for making multiple copies of Buddhist scriptures. One of the earliest dated examples of woodblock printed material is rolled strips of paper printed with Buddhist *mantra* (sacred/magic words) deposited inside the one million wooden miniature pagodas which were commissioned by Empress Shotoku of Japan in 764.



Many examples of printed Buddhist materials survive from the following centuries, both in text and images. The 12th century fan-shaped booklets of the Lotus Sutra are inscribed with the text on top of the printed black outline of images which are hand-coloured and decorated with gold flakes. The unusual character of these decorative booklets is the subject matter of the images which has no relation to the text. The images all depict secular subject matter of everyday activities of people, giving us a glimpse into the life of people in medieval Japan.



Fan shaped Lotus Sutra, Shitenno-ji temple, Osaka,
12th century

Saga-bon

The earliest printed secular book was *The Tales of Ise*, a 10th century romantic story in poems and prose by an anonymous writer, which was published in printed version by the affluent merchant Suminokura Soan in 1608. The printing workshop owned by Suminokura was located in the Saga district of Kyoto, and the books printed there came to be known as “Saga-bon”. These were luxury books printed with movable type and had woodblock illustrations. The well-known calligrapher and artist, Hon’ami Koetsu is credited with having provided the calligraphic letters for the type. In the previous era, *The Tales of Ise* and other medieval literature were only transmitted in manuscript form, but the printed version made these classical works accessible to a much wider audience.



The Tales of Ise, Saga-bon, 1608



Life of Amorous Man with illustration by Hishikawa Moronobu, 1684

Ukiyo-zoshi: Popular stories of the Floating World

The long period of peace maintained by the Tokugawa Shogun’s government in the Edo period (1615 – 1868) brought the flowering of popular culture. Literacy was extremely high in urban centres such as Edo and Osaka (estimated to 60% of population), and there was an insatiable appetite for printed books. Publishing became a major industry in urban centres, and a huge number of books in a variety of topics, from children’s books to popular novels, classical literature, poetry anthologies, historical novels, guidebooks, catalogues, and text books proliferated the cities. Even people who could not afford to buy books had access to popular books in the book rental shops where they could borrow a book for a few days with a small fee.

Birth of *Ukiyo-e*: Images of the Floating World

The artist Moronobu (d.1694) first made his name as an illustrator of books, but he started to make prints without text which could be sold as a single sheet. They were extremely popular among the townspeople who could buy a print at a small cost equivalent of double portion of a bowl of noodles. Encouraged by the success of single sheet print by Moronobu, other artists and publishers soon followed and began producing image only prints. The most popular genre of prints at first was *Yakusha-e*, portrait prints of Kabuki actors, and images of courtesans in the pleasure quarter. The production of prints was a collaboration of artist/designer, block craver, printer, and the publisher, and since prints were cheap and affordable by everyone, thousands of prints were sold during the Edo period.



Torii Kiyomasu, *Takenuki Goro*, 1697



Harunobu, *Courtesan with two attendants*, 1765

Nishiki-e: Polychrome Prints

Early prints were black ink outline only, but some actor prints were hand-coloured to make them more attractive. In 1765, Harunobu (1725 – 1770) invented multi-coloured prints by introducing *kento* registration marks on the block. Several blocks were carved for each colour to be printed, and paper was placed at the right position each time using the registration marks. The technique made it possible to print up to twenty different colours on one image.

The Golden Age of *Ukiyo-e*: Utamaro

By the late 18th century, the skills of block carvers and printers became increasingly refined, and the art of *Ukiyo-e* prints reached its height of technical sophistication. Utamaro (1753 – 1806) collaborated with the successful publisher Tsutaya Juzaburo, and together they published innovative and attractive images of beauties in quick succession in 1790s. One of the innovations was bust portraits of women, some of which were printed on mica background to make them more eye-catching. The mass circulation of images of the world of pleasure was a constant concern to the government, and the governmental censorship and the inspection seal was introduced in 1789. All commercially produced prints carried the censorship seal from 1791 to 1841.



Utamaro, *Ohisa*, 1792/3



Utamaro, *Momochidori Kyoka Book of Birds*
1790

Kyoka club and *Surimono* privately commissioned prints

Kyoka Poetry clubs flourished in Edo where like-minded educated citizens enjoyed making and exchanging witty poems called *Kyoka* (crazy verse). *Kyoka* often contained word plays, hidden meanings, and parody of classical literature, offering the scope to show off the poet's level of education.

Kyoka clubs commissioned publishers to produce anthologies of members' poems as gifts to members at the New Year's celebrations and other commemorative occasions. These privately commissioned books and single sheet prints were beautifully illustrated by leading *Ukiyo-e* artists with special effects such as mica and metallic powders and the texture created by "blind-embossing".

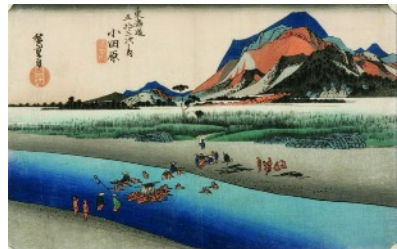
Landscape prints in the 19th century: Hokusai and Hiroshige

The publishers of prints were always looking for a new genre of images to attract the buyers. The increasing interest in travel in the 19th century resulted in the popularity of travel guidebooks and landscape prints by Hokusai (1760 - 1849) and Hiroshige (1797 – 1858). Hokusai was a prolific artist who produced a huge volume of paintings, book illustrations, and print designs, but the print series of “The Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji” of 1830s were by far the most successful of his works. The introduction of imported synthetic blue pigment “Prussian blue” enabled Hokusai to incorporate the intense colour effectively in his design.

Hokusai was an eccentric who called himself “Man crazy about painting”. He changed his professional name 30 times, moved house 90 times, and despite his artistic success, he died penniless at the age of 90.



Hokusai, “The Great Wave” from *The Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji*, 1830s



Hiroshige, “Odawara” from *The Fifty-three Stations of Tokaido*, 1833/4

The success of Hokusai’s Fuji series inspired his younger contemporary Hiroshige to create the series “The Fifty-three Stations of Tokaido” which also proved to be a great success. In 1832, Hiroshige travelled along the Tokaido highway as a member of the Shogun’s envoy to present the gift of horses to the emperor in Kyoto, and observed the countryside, towns, and villages along the way. He began publishing the series in 1833, with some of the images set in different seasons. His interest in different weather conditions, such as rain and snow, added a lyrical and atmospheric character to the print series.

Hiroshige was also very prolific designer, and after the success of the Tokaido series, he designed the series of The Sixty-nine Stations of Kiso Highway, One Hundred Famous Views of Edo, as well as fan designs and individual images.

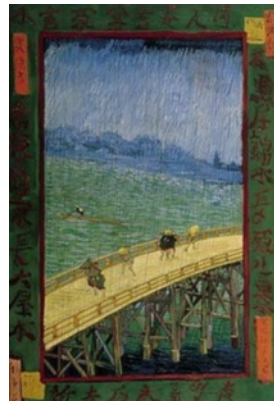
Japonisme

The shogun's policy of national seclusion during the Edo period severely limited the export of Japanese goods to Europe, as the Dutch East-India company was the only European trader allowed to come to Japan. The situation changed in the second half of the 19th century when the pressure from the western nations forced the Shogun to sign treaties to open the country for trade. A series of international expositions in Europe and America offered a platform for Japan to exhibit its art and crafts which attracted an enthusiastic reception.

The art of *Ukiyo-e* prints were to become a particular favorite of the French Impressionist and Post-Impressionist artists who avidly collected these exotic images. Artists such as Claude Monet, Vincent van Gogh, and Toulouse lauttrec studied and analyzed this new visual language, and experimented with their works. Journals such as *Le Japon Artistique* made everything Japanese fashionable and desirable in Paris.



Hiroshige, *Sudden shower at Ohashi*



Vincent van Gogh, Copy in oil

The *Ukiyo-e* prints surprised the European artists with the bright colours, unusual asymmetrical composition, simplified motifs, large area of flat colours, and exaggerated perspective. These characteristics are clearly noticeable in the posters designed by Toulouse Lautrec. The images from everyday life and variety of still life also inspired the artists to search for new kinds of subject matter.

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