

JAPANESE PRINTS

FROM THE LEIBER MUSEUM



The Judith and Gus Leiber Collection of Japanese Woodblock Prints

by E. Frankel

It is my pleasure to be part of this fine exhibition of *ukiyo-e* prints. Just as everything else that the Leibers have done in their business as well as personal lives, it is tribute to their outstanding dedication to taste and connoisseurship. This collection has been put together over the last fifty years primarily in New York City. The Leibers have had the same fascination with Japanese woodblock prints shown by such great artistic talents as Vincent van Gogh, James Abbott McNeil Whistler, Claude Monet, Edgar Degas, Mary Cassatt, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Frank Lloyd Wright and James Mitchner.

In France this influence has been called *Japonisme*, which started with the frenzy to collect Japanese art, particularly woodblock print art (*ukiyo-e*). The woodblock prints from Japan were among the first art of Asia to strongly influence the West. These works were seen in Paris in approximately 1856 and their influence manifested itself in Art Nouveau and French Impressionism. The French artist Félix Bracquemond first came across a copy of the sketchbook *Hokusai Manga* at the workshop of his printer; the woodblocks had been used as packaging for a consignment of porcelain from Japan. In 1860 and 1861 reproductions (in black and white) of *ukiyo-e* were published in books on Japan. In 1861 Baudelaire wrote in a letter: "Quite a while ago I received a packet of *japonneries*. I've split them up among my friends." The following year La Porte Chinoise, a shop selling various Japanese goods including prints, opened in the rue de Rivoli, the most fashionable shopping street in Paris. In 1871 Camille Saint-Saëns wrote a one-act opera, *La princesse jaune* to a libretto by Louis Gallet, in which a Dutch girl is jealous of her artist friend's fixation on a *bijin* (beautiful lady) in a woodblock print.

I think I am getting ahead of myself; first we should discuss the history of woodblock printing and how it came to Japan. The Chinese had come upon the capability of placing repeated stamped images on cloth in the pre-Han period of their history. This concept was developed from engraving stones with raised or incised symbols (sometimes calligraphic) and inking the surface of the stone and pressing the stone on to another surface such as silk. When the Chinese invented paper in the Han dynasty



(206 BC-AD 220) it proved to be a perfect surface for such images. The stone stamps had evolved into wooden stamps and woodblocks. Buddhism arrived in China from India during the Eastern Han dynasty (25-220). Using these woodblocks for sutras and scrolls helped to spread the printed images and written words of Buddhism.

During the Tang dynasty (618-906) woodblock printing had reached Japan and Korea. The earliest printed book extract is the *Diamond Sutra* dated 868 from the Dunhuang Caves in western China. The *Dharani* was the first textual print in Japan (produced in 770), and it had obviously been strongly influenced by China. Empress Shotoku of Japan commissioned an edition of one million copies of Buddhist prayers. It is not known if the blocks for these prints had been made of wood or of other materials. The first woodblock prints were of religious subjects. Buddhist worshippers used woodblock printing to copy images of *bodhisattvas* and religious amulets. In China during the Song Dynasty (960 -1278), lavishly decorated books were produced using woodblocks. At this time, along with printing techniques came the influence of China on the aesthetics of Japan. The Chinese artist Ma Yuan (c. 1160–65 – 1225) a Wei Chinese (Chinese Muslim) was the most well known artist to adopt the asymmetrical style of scroll painting. He was called “One cornered Ma” because most of the images were in one corner of his paintings. His paintings inspired asymmetry in Japanese art as contrasted with the classical Chinese aesthetic of symmetry in design. His work, together with that of Xia Gui, formed the basis of the so-called Ma-Xia school of painting, and is considered among the finest from the Song period. Like most Song academy painters, Ma Yuan was almost forgotten during the later periods, but his work nevertheless inspired Chinese artists of the Zhe School as well as the great early Japanese painters Tenshu Shubun (later 15th to mid 16th centuries) and Sesshu Toyo (1420/26-1506). This was the beginning of the *Yamato-e* (Japanese painter style) that evolved into the Genre School and eventually *Ukiyo-e*.

Suzuki Harunobu (1724-1770)
*Young Priest in Training Shown Walking
 by the River with a Poem by Kukai at Top,
 From the Series “Popular Six Crystal Rivers”*
 26 x 4 3/4 inches (66.04 cm x 12.07 cm)
 Signed: Suzuki Harunobu ga

Suzuki Harunobu (1725 - 1770) was one of the earliest woodblock print artists to exploit the full-color print technique, making him one of the most successful commercial designers in Edo (now Tokyo). He attempted and succeeded in making multicolor prints (*nishiki-e*), which had here-to-fore been made in black and white. In 1764 he was commissioned by an elite group of connoisseurs and artists to make calendar woodblocks. He later marketed these. The calendars were made despite the governmental regulations allowing only certain publishers to make calendars; the secretly made calendars had hidden messages, which only the literati would understand. During the next five years until his death, Harunobu capitalized on its popularity and designed hundreds of color prints of classical and contemporary themes.

In the Crow and Heron print, pictured on the back cover of this catalog, an elegantly dressed couple stroll along under a shared umbrella beneath a snow-laden willow tree. The man is dressed in black and wears a hood, while the lady is cloaked in a flowing white outer robe. This fashionable pair reflects the rise of the wealthy *chonin* (middle class populace) and their interest in elegant clothes, pleasurable pastimes, and the arts, especially woodblock prints. This was a difficult economic time due to many natural disasters such as earthquakes, drought, rice famine and the resulting riots in many provinces so it is evident that the fleeting pleasures had to be enjoyed. Harunobu depicted beautiful women as being slender and graceful. He did not individualize his figures but presented them as idealized images without unique features.

Kitagawa Utamaro (ca. 1753 - October 31, 1806) was a printmaker and painter. He is especially known for his masterfully done studies of women, known as *bijinga*. He also produced nature studies, particularly illustrated books of insects. In some biographies he is listed as a pupil of Harunobu but this is not accepted in all historic texts. His work reached Europe in the mid-nineteenth century when the woodblock prints were used as ballast in porcelain shipments. Utamaro was very popular in France where his use of light



Kitagawa Utamaro (1753-1806)
*Courtesan Holding a Pipe with Calligraphic
Poem about a Blooming Flower*
14 1/2 x 9 inches
(36.83 cm x 22.86 cm)
Signed: Utamaro hitsu

and perspective influenced the Impressionists. The reference to the “Japanese influence” among these artists often refers to the work of Utamaro. The elongated face, nose and neck are reminiscent of later Amedeo Modigliani and of the aesthetic of the Western magazine models of today.



Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849)
*View From the Mountains in Totomi Province,
From the Series “36 Views of Mount Fuji”*
9 3/4 x 14 inches (24.77 cm x 35.56 cm)
Signed: Hokusai ga

Katsushika Hokusai was born in Edo (Tokyo) in 1760. At the age of fourteen he worked with Katsukawa Shunshu, a renowned artist of Kabuki Theater prints. Hokusai’s most famous works are from his sketchbook *Hokusai Manga, Famous Places in Edo*, and *36 Views of Mt. Fuji* (1834-35). He was greatly influenced by the Western lithographs and the Chinese paintings he had seen. He worked in Western perspective, which is probably why the French Impressionists he influenced could more easily understand him. Here is a perfect example of artistic nuance traveling both East and West. Hokusai’s single most famous print is the “Great Wave of Kanagawa” which is influenced by the Goto School of sword furniture metal work. He once made the statement that all of nature could be depicted in circles and triangles. This can clearly be seen in *The Great Wave of Kanagawa*. Hokusai also worked with plant and insect subjects as well as genre scenes, daily scenes of common activities.

Keisai Eisen (1790 – 1848). Eisen was the son of the well established Ikeda family, his father a noted calligrapher. He was known for his *bijinga* (pictures of beautiful women) in the *ukiyo-e* manner. He made good use of the *kubi-e* (large head pictures) and they are considered his best work even though they are considered masterpieces of the decadent Bunsei Era (1818-1830). He had other names such as Ikeda Eisen, and wrote under the name of Ippitsuan. He was an apprentice of Kano Hakkeisai and thus took the name Keisai. After the death of his father he was a student of Kokugawa Eizan. His early works showed the influences of his teacher; however he soon developed his own style. He produced a number of prints that were privately issued called *surimono* woodblock prints. These were small, yet fine works often done for the New Year celebration. He also did *shunga* (erotic prints) and landscapes including *The Sixty Stations of the Kuso Kaid*, which he started, but which was completed by Ando Hiroshige. His most famous works are the *bijin-e* (pictures of beautiful women) which portrayed the subject as more sensuous and worldly. Earlier they had been depicted as the epitome of grace and elegance with less sensuality.

Eisen produced many portraits and full-length studies depicting the fashions of the time. In addition to producing a prolific number of prints, he was a writer, of the biographies of the *Forty-seven Ronin* (unattached *samurai*) and several books such as the *Ukiyo-e Ruiko* (History of Prints of the Floating World), a book documenting the lives of the *ukiyo-e* artists. His supplement to this work is *Notes of a Nameless Old Man*. He describes himself as a dissolute heavy drinker and claims to have been the owner of a brothel in Nezu in the 1830's which had burned down.



Keisai Eisen (1790-1848)
Courtesan in a Long Kimono as a Train
 9 x 6 1/2 inches
 (22.86 cm x 16.51 cm)
 Signed: Kikukawa Eizan hitsu

Utagawa Toyokuni III (1786–1865) was born in Honjo, an eastern district of Edo. His family owned and ran a small licensed and hereditary ferryboat service and the income from this business provided a certain basic financial security. Toyokuni’s father, an amateur poet of some renown, died in the year after his birth. While growing up as a half-orphan, it seems the artist developed an early talent for painting and drawing.

His early sketches were favorably received by Toyokuni I, who was the master of the Utagawa School, which produced Kabuki, and actor-portrait woodblock prints. In the year 1800 or shortly thereafter Kunisada was accepted by Toyokuni I as an apprentice in his workshop. In keeping with a tradition of Japanese master-apprentice relations, he was then given the official artist name of Kunisada, the first character of which was derived from the second part of the name Toyokuni.



*Utagawa Tokoyuni III (later known as Kunisada) (1786-1864)
Jiraiya, From the Series “Comical Pictures of Thieves and Killers”
14 1/4 x 9 1/4 inches (36.2 cm x 23.5 cm)
Signed: Konomi ni makaseto, Toyokuni ga*

Ando Hiroshige was born in 1797 with the name Ando Tokutaro. His father’s family had been fire wardens at Edo Castle and lived with his family in the barracks. Young Ando took his hereditary position as fire warden even though he showed talent in art, which aroused considerable interest from teachers and artists nearby. He lost both parents when he was 12 years old and left his hereditary position to become an artist. In 1811, he enrolled as an apprentice with

the famous Utagawa School, working with *ukiyo-e* master Toyohiro Utagawa. He graduated in 1812, and continued the tradition of taking the name of your teacher. He took the name of his master, christening himself Utagawa Hiroshige. Many consider Ando Hiroshige the most popular Japanese artist in history. He created some 5,400 images, which are highly collected to this day.



Ando Hiroshige (later known as Utagawa)
(1797- Oct. 12, 1858)
*Scene of Travellers Ascending a Tree Lined
Mountain Path From the Series "Edo Hyakkei"*
(Edo Hyakkei)
9 x 14 inches (22.86 cm x 35.56 cm)
Signed: Hiroshige ga

The Leiber Collection includes fine examples of the height of *ukiyo-e* woodblock art. Judith and Gerson Leiber had the good fortune and great vision to amass examples of a great period of art, *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints of Japan.



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Front Cover:

Kitagawa Utamaro
Portrait Bust of the Wife of Nakashina (*Nakashina No Nyobo*)

Back Cover:

Suzuki Harunobu
Winter Scene of Black Crow and White Heron:
Two Lovers Sharing an Umbrella in the Snow Under a Willow Tree

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446 Old Stone Highway
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11937

www.leibermuseum.org





鈴木春信画