

Pictures of the 'floating world'

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Beauty and Desire in Edo Period Japan
 Exhibit at the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
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Beauty and Desire, an extensive exhibition of woodblock prints, paintings and fashionable costumes currently featured at the National Gallery of Australia, provides the viewer with an insight into a remarkable period of artistic development in Japan.

Ukiyo-e, or "pictures of the floating world," flourished within the commercial sectors of the great Japanese cities of the Tokugawa shogunate (1603-1868) -- Edo (present day Tokyo), the shogun's headquarters; Kyoto, the old imperial centre; and Osaka, with its wealthy merchants and trading houses.

By a play on the term "uki," the original Buddhist expression "ukiyo," signifying "sorrowful world," came to mean "floating world," carrying with it the implications of rapidly changing fads and fashions, and a devil-may-care attitude to life.

It was an apt phrase for the vibrant life and culture in the "nightless cities" or licenced entertainment quarters of the major urban centres with their restaurants, baths, theatres and brothels. There, the merchants, shopkeepers and artisans, surreptitiously joined by members of the ruling samurai or warrior elite, indulged themselves relatively free of the rigid rules and regulations of a highly stratified feudal society.

The growing wealth and influence of the chonin or townspeople fostered a layer of highly sophisticated painters, designers, actors, musicians, writers and skilled craftsmen, who, drawing on earlier Japanese and Chinese traditions, created new artistic forms -- a down-to-earth and often bawdy literature, the kabuki theatre, and the woodblock prints of ukiyo-e.

The ukiyo-e artists developed their own styles and exquisite designs, bringing vigour, elegance and creativity as well as sensuality and eroticism to their two main subjects -- the courtesan and the kabuki actor.

Beauty and Desire is the first major exhibition of ukiyo-e in Australia, bringing together about 100 woodblock prints as well as a number of kimonos, painted screens and wall hangings from galleries and private collections around Australia and internationally.

Its primary focus is the representation of the women of the floating world -- the courtesans and the female entertainers or geisha -- a theme which restricts the contents. Few of the striking landscapes and city scenes produced in the latter part of the period are present. And from the kabuki theatre, there is a rather one-sided selection -- only pictures of the onnagatta, the highly trained male actors who portrayed women on stage.

Nevertheless the exhibition does enable one to examine and appreciate the evolution of an extraordinary art which, over two and a half centuries, developed its own unique expressiveness, beauty and vitality, in turn exerting a profound influence on the European painters of the late 19th century.

Ukiyo-e is a product of the particular social contradictions of the Tokugawa period. For hundreds of years Japan was wracked by rivalry and wars between the daimyo or feudal lords, who had emerged as the dominant force out of the decaying imperial court society centred in Kyoto.

In 1600, Tokugawa Ieyasu defeated his major rivals in the battle of Sekigahara and in 1603 assumed the title of shogun or supreme military leader. For the next 265 years, the Tokugawa shogunate based in Edo, its vassals, retainers and armies of samurai held political predominance over a unified Japan.

To control foreign trade and to forestall the political threat posed by Christian missionaries and the European powers which stood behind them, a policy of total seclusion was adopted. By the 1640s, foreign trade was restricted to the Dutch and the Chinese through the southern port of Nagasaki. No Japanese was permitted to travel abroad, severely limiting the influence of European ideas, science and culture.

Within Japan, the establishment of peace, initially at least, contributed to significant economic growth. Agricultural improvements and an expansion of land under cultivation led to a doubling of cereal production between 1600 and 1740.

Prosperity and an end to military hostilities greatly enhanced the economic role of the merchant and the growth of commercial houses in Osaka and Edo. Samurai and daimyo, whose income was measured in rice, were dependent on the merchants to convert their share of the crops into money -- the vital commodity for the purchase of a widening range of urban goods.

The wealth of the merchant class was substantial. By 1761, more than 200 commercial houses in Japan had a total capital equivalent in value to the estates of many of the daimyo. The economic rise of the merchant class was paralleled by the rapid growth of the major cities -- particularly Edo, the administrative and political centre of the shogunate. By 1700 the city is estimated to have had a population of one million -- far greater than London or Paris of the day. Osaka and Kyoto each had around 400,000 people.

The earliest works in the exhibition reflect the new preoccupations of the merchant class. A substantial decorative screen painted by an anonymous artist records in intricate detail the bustle of urban life in Kyoto around the year 1660 -- from ceremonies at the temples to street fighting and the audience at a theatre.

An ornate mid-17th century screen depicts a scene from the Shimabara licenced district in Kyoto -- samurai, a monk and others in the company of young men and women are engaged in a variety of relaxed pursuits, from drinking sake to making music and playing cards.

Tokugawa Japan



"Enya Takasada's wife being spied upon by Kono Moronao" from the "Series of Beautiful Women" by Hishikawa Moronobu

By the 1650

new art led to a revival and development of the ancient techniques of woodblock printing in order to translate images from painted wall hangings and screens into cheaper and more readily available books of prints.

Edo artist Hishikawa Moronobu (c.1618-1694), who came from a family of textile producers and designers, is regarded as a founder of ukiyo-e. The exhibition has a single monochrome woodblock print entitled "Enya Takasada's wife being spied upon by Kono Moronao" from Moronobu's Series of Beautiful Women published in 1683. The image, accompanied by a poem, captures the longing of Moronao who was to be executed for his amorous activities.

Another early monochrome print "Girl with Koto" is by Nishikawa Sukenobu (1671-1750), the leader of the Kyoto school. Sukenobu, who influenced later Edo artists, was one of the first to depict courtesans in a refined manner, combining apparent innocence with aristocratic elegance and grace.

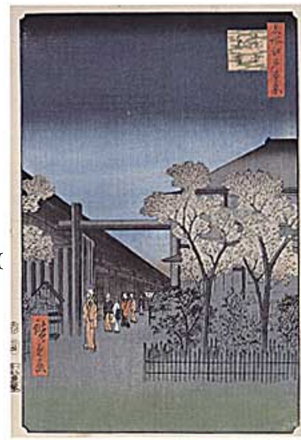
The floating world

Ukiyo-e art stood in sharp contrast to the more refined themes of the contemporary classical schools of painting. Its narrow focus on the sensual pleasures of the courtesan and the kabuki theatre reflected, at least in part, the peculiar character of the niche that the artists inhabited.

The "floating world" was a refuge from the rigid, hierarchical society of feudal Japan. For the artist it brought a degree of freedom of association and expression unheard of in highly polished and defined classical traditions. It was not unknown for painters and writers to come together at parties to produce seki-ga -- impromptu painting combined with spontaneous poetry known as kyoka, literally mad verse. One painting at the exhibition "Courtesan standing beneath a tree" by Kubo Shumman is such a work.

For the merchant, the "nightless cities" were the only arena where his money bought a measure of social equality. Outside its narrow confines, the merchant was the lowest of the low -- according to official Confucian philosophy, a mere "mover of goods," who ranked below the artisan, the peasant and the samurai. In a social order in which every aspect of life was formally prescribed in written codes, only the samurai was allowed to have a surname and to carry two swords.

A merchant may have been rich but he had no political status or power and was subject to the arbitrary whims of the shogun and daimyo. It was only in Yoshihara and the other licenced quarters that the merchant could entertain lavishly and forge alliances with layers of the samurai class who lacked money but still retained a far higher social standing.



"Dawn in the licenced quarters" from the series "One Hundred Famous Views of Edo" (1857) by Utagawa (Ando) Hiroshige

demand for the

The entertainment districts were the only officially condoned release from the highly formal relations of everyday life in Tokugawa Japan, particularly as there were no mixed social functions and marriages were arranged with an eye to social status and advancement.

The images of the courtesan depicted in the ukiyo-e prints certainly played to the desires of the patrons. They varied from the rather restrained designs revealing a provocative ankle, a slightly dishevelled kimono or hairdo, or the red inner lining of the garment to illustrations of a sexually explicit character.

But ukiyo-e also reflect a highly refined culture. The courtesans were women bonded at a young age to a bordello for a period of 10 years. They were often accomplished in music, conversation and poetry as well as complex forms of social etiquette. The images are obviously idealised representations, yet the grace and elegance of the design, the allusions to classical literature and the accompanying poems tell us something of the motivations and aesthetics which influenced social life.

Some designs communicate a psychological mood, through the use of symbols as well as expression and posture. One of the more fantastic shows the head of a courtesan with a "thought" emanating of a cat with an umbrella dressed up in a kimono. Produced by Kikugawa Kikumaro in the early 19th century, it draws on a folk belief that when cats were killed they returned to avenge themselves by taking on human forms.

The expressiveness and creativity of the artists was dependent on the skill and subtlety of the craftsmen in producing the woodblock prints. Initially any colour was added to the black and white print by hand. But by the 1740s, the technique of making high quality multi-colour prints had been developed.

Each of the stages in producing a print -- artist, blockmaker and printer -- was time consuming and required painstaking attention to detail. Each colour required a separate block, with all the lines and detail meticulously carved into a carefully chosen and seasoned piece of cherry wood. The blocks were then used to add layer upon layer of colour to the print. Different techniques were used to ensure perfect registration of the colours, and to create various effects of light and shade. Successful designs were printed from the same woodblocks in their thousands.

Social disintegration

By the turn of the 19th century, Japanese society was increasingly wracked by social and economic crisis. As in the case of European feudalism, the growth of the money economy and the rise of the merchant class corroded and undermined the relations of feudal society. Inflation

and economic instability, peasant revolts fueled by onerous taxes and discontent among all social classes surfaced more frequently.

The shogunate resorted to more exacting social control and repression at all levels of society. Within the licenced districts, tighter restrictions and censorship were enforced. As early as 1790, regulations were promulgated banning erotic works. By 1805, a number of artists, including the well-known Kitagawa Utamaro, had been condemned to periods of house arrest for flouting the new rules.

A different mood prevailed among ukiyo-e artists. They were encouraged to turn to other subjects including safe historical themes. Yet despite the restrictions, the previous artistic traditions with their sensitivity and appreciation of beauty found a new outlet in landscapes, town views and scenes from everyday life which are richly coloured, dynamic and evocative.

The work of Katsushika Hokusai, including his series "Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji," and Ando Hiroshige who produced "Fifty-three Stations of the Tokaido Highway," are among the best-known of Japanese art. Both use a full range of colours -- Prussian blue only became available in Japan from the 1820s.

Only a limited number of their designs are on display. But the five Hiroshige prints, including several from his series "One Hundred Views of Edo" published in 1857, are among the most attractive in the exhibition. Hiroshige was able to exploit a knowledge of perspective, which only gradually filtered to Japan through from European art, as well as Japanese artistic traditions to give his designs great depth and feeling.

In 1858, the forcible opening of Japan by US warships greatly accelerated the disintegration of Tokugawa feudalism. Powerful and diverse class forces, including disaffected samurai and daimyo as well as merchants, were expressed in a growing nationalist movement against the shogunate. It was replaced in 1868 with a new regime headed by the almost defunct emperor. Known as the Meiji restoration, the revolt, carried out by elements of the old ruling classes, was aimed at forestalling a social revolution from below, and initiating a forced march towards capitalism.



"Kirino Toshiaki's wife" from the series "Eastern Pictures of Heroic Women Compared" (1880) by Tsukioka Yoshitoshi

The first overtly political compositions come from this turbulent historic period. One print by Tsukioka Yoshitoshi entitled "Kirino Toshiaki's wife" concerns the fate of samurai who, having participated in the Meiji restoration, rapidly found themselves at odds with the new social order. Kirino Toshiaki was an adviser to Saigo Takamori, the leader of the failed 1877 Satsuma rebellion, the last of the major samurai revolts.

Kirino Toshiaki's wife is shown in an attitude of defiance. The accompanying text reads: "She bravely stood at the head of the women's

troops. At the truce she offered help and shared her food with starving soldiers. Participating in the joys and sorrows of the soldiers in the battlefield, she did her best to help them." It reflects a sentimental nostalgia for the feudal past which continued into the 20th century.

The opening of Japan in 1858 had another significant cultural consequence. For the first time, ukiyo-e art became widely known in Europe. The previously unknown tradition began to open up new expressive possibilities for European artists. Whereas in Japan, ukiyo-e was regarded as inferior to the classical painting schools, in France the enthusiasm for the art form gave rise to a new term "Japonisme". The style, colour and dynamism of the ukiyo-e prints was to exert a deep influence on French expressionist artists.

The impact of the Japanese woodblock prints in Europe is a testimony to its appeal to universal human sensibilities and feelings. For nearly three centuries, a unique artistic tradition incubated in a Japan which was cut off from the rest of the world. Many of the symbols in the prints would have only been immediately apparent to a Japanese viewer. Yet the sense of beauty and design was able to bridge the gulf of time and culture. This remains the case today.



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