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# The Floating World of Ukiyo-e Prints:

# Images of a Japanese Counterculture

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**Abstract**
Ukiyo-e, or "pictures of the floating world," were woodblock prints that, among other subjects, depicted the "women of pleasure" and Kabuki actors of Japan's Edo Period pleasure quarters. The pleasure quarters, or yukaku, were popular gathering places for the chonin, or urban working class. This essay contextualizes ukiyo-e images of courtesans, geishas, and Kabuki actors, and discusses how such countercultural artworks often came into conflict with the ruling Tokugawa shogunate's dominate social order. The essay also includes a brief discussion of historical relations between eastern ukiyo-e art and differing western traditions. The essay concludes with a comparison of significant, related ukiyo-e and western modernist prints.

**Keywords**: Ukiyo-e, Japanese Art, Woodblock Print, Tokugawa, Courtesan, Kabuki

## 1. Introduction: The chonin floating world

Ukiyo-e is a Japanese term usually translated into English as "pictures of the floating world." Historians and collectors use the term to refer to woodblock prints that depicted the libertine denizens of pleasure quarters, such as courtesans and Kabuki actors, during Japan's Edo Period (1615-1868). The urban middle-class, known as the chonin (meaning "persons of the town"), were the primary patrons of ukiyo-e woodblock prints. Although the chonin class did not occupy a high position on the Edo Period's social hierarchy, these "persons of the town" soon became Japan's most powerful economic force. This presented a threat to Japan's feudal system under the Tokugawa shogunate. The chonin spent much of their wealth in diversions, such as attending the Kabuki theater and collecting ukiyo-e prints. "Alongside the official culture of the feudal aristocracy, which was geared to China and Confucianism, they developed a flourishing urban culture" (Schlombs 2007: 28). Chonin art reflected lifestyles that lay in opposition to the prevailing feudal order and was, in effect, Japan's counterculture.

The term ukiyo-e has three Japanese characters: 浮世絵. The first character, 浮 (pronounced "uki"), can be translated as "float"; the second character, 世 ("yo"), translates as "world"; the third character, 絵 ("e") translates as "picture," "painting," or "print." Therefore, the basic translation of 浮世絵 (ukiyo-e) is "pictures of the floating world." Ukiyo-e prints represented passing (or floating) life; they represented common, everyday existence (Fiorillo 1999-2001).

Long before the Edo Period, however, there was another term that was also pronounced ukiyo: 憂世. This earlier term can be translated "world of sorrow." Buddhist literature of Japan's Heian period (794-1185) used this earlier term to express melancholy and sorrow toward the transience of everyday life and the inevitable loss of its beauty. By the Edo Period, the chonin rarely used ukiyo to lament the passing of life, in a Buddhist sense. Rather, the chonin used ukiyo to celebrate the joys of life, and the secular world of pleasure and entertainment. Asai Ryoi (ca. 1612-1691), an Edo era Buddhist priest, embodied this transition. Ryoi reveled in the urban life of his contemporary Kyoto. In his 1661 novel *Story of the Floating World* (*Ukiyo monogatari*), Ryoi wrote,

> Live for the moment, look at the moon, the cherry-blossom and maple leaves, love wine, women and poetry, encounter with humor the poverty that stares you in the face and don't be discouraged by it, *let yourself be carried along on the river of life* like a calabash that drifts downstream*, that is what ukiyo means* [emphasis added]" (see Inouye, 2008).

Japan's last feudal military government, the Tokugawa shogunate, or Tokugawa *bakufu* (1600-1868) fought to control and preserve the country's social structure during the Edo Period (figure 1). The shogunate limited foreign influences and supported the dominant social system and a strict class hierarchy, which the Imperial Regent, Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537-1598) had imposed in the sixteenth century. The Tokugawa government promulgated a hereditary Confucian ethic, which compartmentalized society into three descending classes: 1) the ruling class of shoguns and feudal lords (or *daimyo*), 2) farmers and rural peasants (the vast majority of the population), and 3) the artisans and merchants of the chonin class. Itinerant artists, various basic tradesmen, ordinary prostitutes, and beggars lived outside these classes. Over time, however, the influence of the dominant feudal lords and warrior-caste (*samurai*) declined as the chonin rose in prominence. The ability to support the floating world and to support a market for woodblock prints, of the floating world, manifested the rising economic prosperity of Japan's merchant class.



Figure 1. Utagawa Yoshitora (1836-1882). The Tokugawa Shoguns, ca. 1875. Public Domain.

## 2. From the country to the city

Woodblock prints came in many categories: historical scenes, portraiture, *genres* (scenes of everyday life), still lives, and landscapes. Utagawa Hiroshige (1797-1858) and Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849) are revered as two of Japan's finest landscape artists, and the last great masters of the ukiyo-e landscape tradition. Hokusai's series Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji (c. 1830-1832), which included the iconic "Great Wave" (figure 2), and Hiroshige's series Fifty-Three Stations of the Tokaido (1833-1834) initiated a distinguished era of landscape for ukiyo-e woodblock printmaking. Before Hiroshige and Hokusai, landscape served merely as a stage for the

activities of historical heroes or as a theatrical backdrop. Hiroshige and Hokusai, on the other hand, used people merely as picturesque elements within vast, sublime panoramas (notice the tiny rowing figures at the bottom of figure 2) or as diminutive visitors to famous temples, monuments, or other sights.



Figure 2. Katsushika Hokusai. Under the Wave off Kanagawa, 1833.
The Art Institute of Chicago. CC0.

*Meisho-e,* or "pictures of famous places," celebrated unusual sights and destinations around Japan. The locations in Meisho-e imagery often had literary and historical associations or featured particularly awe-inspiring natural phenomena. Pilgrims and sightseers flocked to these locales during specific seasons. For centuries, artists of Japan's classical styles of painting decorated screens and sliding doors in the homes of the court nobility with meisho-e. Ukiyo-e landscape artists, however, like Hokusai and Hiroshige, created prints for popular consumption (Schlombs 2007). Hokusai and Hiroshige sold their prints individually or as sets, or fulfilled commissions for illustrated travel publications. People traveling through the countryside bought landscape prints as mementos of the famous sights they visited and people stuck in the city bought prints and illustrated travel books in contemplation of visiting the same famous sights someday.

Widespread urbanization began during the Edo Period, as Japan's provincial castle towns grew into merchant cities. By 1800, Japan was one of the most urbanized countries in the world and Edo (the former name of Tokyo) was among the world's most populated cities (Sorensen, 2002). "The river of life" described by Asai Ryoi frequently carried Japanese from the countryside into the urban areas of Edo, Kyoto, and Osaka. Ukiyo-e printmakers documented travelers' journeys from the country into the city, and their stops along the way (figures 3, 4).



Figure 3 (left). Utagawa Hiroshige. The Fifty-Three Stations of Tokaido: Otsu. 1834.
Cleveland Museum of Art. CC0.

Figure 4 (right). Utagawa Hiroshige. The Sixty-Nine Stations of Kisokaido: Shimosuwa. 1838.
Cleveland Museum of Art. CC0.

The Tokugawa shogunate issued an edict requiring the daimyo feudal lords to keep residences in Edo to maintain close connections with the central authorities. The shogunate constructed five highways leading from major provincial cities to Edo, which stimulated travel by daimyo dignitaries, merchants, religious pilgrims, entertainers, sightseers, and others (The Library of Congress (a), 2001). The Tokaido route (and the alternate Kisokaido route) ran three hundred miles between Kyoto and Edo. In figures 2 and 3, Hiroshige portrayed *shuku-eki*, way stations along the routes, where travelers stopped to rest. In figure 3, a weary band has stopped for the day at a shuku-eki in Shimosuwa to share a meal at an inn. The proprietor looks on with satisfaction as her patrons enjoy their feast. In the background, through an open door, another traveler soaks in a wooden tub filled with warm spring water. Shimosuwa had the only shuku-eki along the Kisokaido route with a natural hot spring (The Cleveland Museum of Art (a) 2019).

Travelers from Kyoto on the Tokaido and Kisokaido highways eventually arrived at the terminus shuku-eki in the Nihonbashi district of Edo (figure 5). This terminus sat just outside the Edo Castle, where Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543-1616) established the Tokugawa shogunate's political and military headquarters. Today, Tokyo's Imperial Palace occupies the same spot. Many Edo Period travelers eventually made their way from the Nihonbashi district to the Yoshiwara (or "good luck meadow"), a pleasure quarter approximately three miles away (see Seigle 1993).



Figure 5. Utagawa Hiroshige. Fifty-three Stations of the Tokaido Road: Nihonbashi. 1833-1834.

## 3. The pleasure quarters

Throughout history, the world's larger cities have had designated entertainment and pleasure districts, which government authorities have tolerated (or even encouraged) to varying degrees. These districts have supported *bohemian* communities and fostered underground subcultures that created unconventional forms of music, theater, and literature (see Morosi 2019). This was the case during Japan's Edo Period, though the cultures of the pleasure districts of Edo, Kyoto, and Osaka have proven to be particularly significant. They produced art forms, such as the Kabuki theater and ukiyo-e prints, that constitute an important part of Japan's tangible and intangible cultural heritage (see UNESCO 2019; Koyama-Richard 2014).

Ukiyo-e prints reflected the ethos of a segment of the chonin class (Schlombs, 2007). That social segment regularly escaped into the yukaku, or *red-light districts*, of Edo (Yoshiwara), Osaka (Shinmachi), Kyoto (Shimabara), and, on a somewhat more limited scale, Nagasaki (Maruyama). These districts provided merchant-class visitors with sensual diversions, free from the expectations and restraints of a feudalist society.

The Tokugawa shogunate circumscribed the practice of prostitution to strictly delineated, walled-in areas. Access was limited, employees were licensed, and customers were taxed (Akane, 2018). *Yujo* ("women of pleasure," or prostitutes) fulfilled carnal desires at preset rates. Yujo adhered to their own hierarchy with high-ranking *oiran* courtesans and ultra-high-ranking *tayu* at the apex. When a tayu retired, she a passed down her professional name to another women working in the same establishment. Oiran and tayu were skilled in traditional Japanese arts,

such as the tea ceremony (*sado*), flower arrangement (*ikebana*), poetry, and calligraphy. They were also entertainers, who often enjoyed celebrity status outside the pleasure quarters.

Edo's Yoshiwara was the largest and, arguably, the most culturally significant yukaku. Edo (meaning "entrance to the bay") grew rapidly from an obscure fishing village into one of the world's largest cities. The founder of the Tokugawa shogunate, Tokugawa Ieyasu chose Edo as his headquarters in 1590. By 1720, there were one million inhabitants. By 1750, there were one and a half million. Edo's densely congested districts fostered a vibrant urban culture.



Figure 6. Postcard showing Yoshiwara Great Gate, ca. 1910. Public Domain.

Yoshiwara, Edo's only licensed red-light district, was a twenty-acre walled compound surrounded by a moat. The district was established near Edo's center in 1617, but was forced to move to the northeastern edge of the city forty years later. Visitors entered Yoshiwara's Great Gate (or *oman*) via Nakanocho Street (figure 6). Yoshiwara was a cluster of shops, fashionable teahouses, theaters, and over one hundred government-sanctioned brothels neatly arranged along a grid of smaller streets. Posted signs pointed the way to specific brothels, restaurants, theaters, and other entertainment venues. By 1800, approximately four thousand yujo worked in Yoshiwara, from the elite tayu and oiran down the social spectrum to numerous women providing quick, inexpensive services in very modest structures. Although in pleasure quarters the limitations of social class could be set aside, Ukiyo-e artists tended to distinguish yujo in their images according to their rank, costumes, and more refined social tasks, overlooking the exploitation and psychological misery caused by the prostitution trade (Asian Art Museum 2012).

In Utagawa Toyokuni's late eighteenth century *triptych* (a three-sectioned artwork) (figure 7), three tayu and their attendants promenade down Nakanocho Street at sunset. An unaccompanied courtesan sits on a porch to the left, smoking a slender pipe, watching the procession. On the right, a samurai, concealing his identity behind a fan and hooded cloak, admires two courtesans pretending they do not notice his attention (The Cleveland Museum of Art (b) 2019). Perhaps this man of the ruling class did not want his face seen in Yoshiwara. After the government began requiring feudal lords to maintain a presence in Edo, their retinues started spending their time and money in Yoshiwara, away from the constraints of their provincial communities and families.



Figure 7. Utagawa Toyokuni (1769-1825). Courtesans Promenading on the Nakanocho. ca. 1790. Cleveland Museum of Art. CC0.

To contemporary eyes, Toyokuni's scene of promenading courtesans does not seem particularly disturbing, but Tokugawa authorities may have thought otherwise. Even though samurai and daimyo administrators patronized the pleasure quarters, the government officially disapproved of the *erotic culture* the chonin class fostered in yukaku. Beginning the same year Toyokuni created figure 7 (1790), ukiyo-e artists were required to submit their work to government censors and have an stamp of approval, or *kiwame*, placed on their prints (see Thompson, 2012). The chonin were at the bottom of the feudal system, but they possessed great wealth and they spent lavishly on art and entertainment. The more austere members of the shogunate tried to limit chonin extravagance and lasciviousness through sumptuary laws and censorship.

From the early seventeenth century onward, Tokugawa rulers regularly issued injunctions intended to rein in the distribution of "dubious materials" (Thompson, 2012, p. 56). The chonin idealized the more famous courtesans as standards of beauty and trendsetters and many Kabuki actors enjoyed similar reputations. Government censors were circumspect of the influence of celebrities on the public and, therefore, placed restrictions on what ukiyo-e could portray and even on how many colors could be used (McLelland 2015: 403-404). Briefly, during the Reform Period of 1841-1843, Tokugawa censors banned all portraits of female entertainers, all portraits of Kabuki actors, and prints of any subject featuring more than seven colors. The goal was to "stem the tide of luxury, immorality and opposition that seemed to challenge [the government's] position." During the Reform Period, depictions of historical heroes were allowed, because they did not offend the "virtues of courage, loyalty and Confucian filial piety" (Schlombs 2007: 41).

Authorities also censored poetry and other forms of literature (Suzuki 2012). Censors were especially wary of a type of ukiyo-e called *uta-e*, or "poem pictures." Uta-e images illustrated or captured the essence of poetic texts, which the artist wrote above or beside the image. In many ways, the playful form of verse called *haikai no renga* (or "comic linked verse") was the literary analogue to ukiyo-e imagery. The popular haikai form evolved in the sixteenth century from the traditional *ushin renga* poetic genre. In a similar way, the popular Kabuki theatrical genre evolved from the more aristocratic Noh theater. By the seventeenth century, chonin urbanites had embraced haikai's informal qualities and its use of the vernacular language of everyday life. Haikai poetry was celebrated and incorporated into woodblock prints called *surimono*, or "printed things." Friends and family members exchanged surimono as special gifts on important occasions such as holidays. Figure 8 is a surimono print showing the poet Hisagataya dancing with a geisha on the stage of a teahouse theater in the Furuichi district of Osaka. Hisagataya's poem is barely distinguishable in the print's black background.



Figure 8 Yashima Gakutei. The Dance at Furuichi for the Hisagataya Group, ca. 1825.
The Cleveland Museum of Art. CC0.

## 4. The process and makers of ukiyo-e prints

Today, ukiyo-e prints are thought of as the individual works of the artist, but they usually resulted from the joint-efforts of a publisher, artist, carver, and printer. The publisher supervised the process, from the planning stage through the sale of the finished prints. Publishers commissioned artists to design a single image or series. When the artist was through, a carver (or *horishi*) pasted the image onto a woodblock, usually cherry wood. Cherry woodblocks were favored for their hardness and durability; they could be printed many, many times. The carver incised the artist's contour lines into the *key block* with a sharp knife and dug out the areas that were not to be printed. A printer then inked the block with black ink called *sumi* and laid a dampened sheet, handmade from mulberry pulp, on top. The printer (or *surishi*) then transferred the impression by rubbing the paper with a baren. The key block impression established the outlines and guide marks (*kento*) for the application of subsequent colors. The first woodcuts were monochromatic, black impressions, although hand coloring could be applied (see figure 9). Full-color prints (called *nishiki-e*), became common in the 1760s. For each additional color, the carver carved a separate block, which the printer rubbed with the new color and transferred onto the key block impression (see Folks 2018). Producing ukiyo-e prints could be a quite laborious process.



Figure 9. Torii Kiyonobu I. Courtesan painting a screen, ca. 1711.
The Art Institute of Chicago. CC0.

Each participant in the production of ukiyo-e prints was a member of the chonin class, though even in this arena there was a hierarchy. The publisher financed the project, paid for advertising when necessary, and distributed the prints. Successful publishers were highly influential. They promoted works by established masters, discovered new artists, and detected and set trends within the print market. The leading artists were celebrated master craftsmen with widespread name recognition. They usually printed their names into their designs. The block carver and printer, conversely, were anonymous artisans, though their skills were integral to the production of a successful print.

*Machi-eshi*, early precursors of ukiyo-e artists, were active during the Nanboku-cho and Muromachi periods of Japanese history (roughly, 1330-1580). During this time of social upheaval, many artists lost the patronage of the shoguns and religious communities, so they migrated to cities to sell their work to urban merchants. Machi-eshi worked in anonymity fulfilling inexpensive commissions for monochromatic prints. Common subjects included stylishly dressed women, actors, and erotica. The leaders of Japan's established schools of painting, the Tosa and (Chinese inspired) Kano, did not recognize such work and later ukiyo-e masters somewhat condescendingly referred to the machi-eshi as "primitives."

The Torii and Kaigetsudo schools of painting were immediate precursors to the ukiyo-e movement. The Torii school specialized in Kabuki actor and theatrical prints; the Kaigetsudo school was known for prints of "beautiful women dressed in elaborately patterned *kimono*" (Harris, 2010: 14-15). The founder of the Torii school, Torii Kiyonobu I (1664-1729) was a transitional figure, whose career fits between the machi-eshi and ukiyo-e eras.

Figure 9 is the frontispiece of Kiyonobu's famous set of twelve erotic prints, ca 1711. A reclining man looks on admiringly as a courtesan paints a floral scene on a folded screen. Another woman mixes pigments in the background. Though condemned by the Tokugawa authorities, erotic art, or *shun-ga*, was a popular, though underground, ukiyo-e genre.

### 5. *Bijin-ga*

Before the advent of the Meiji era, the ideal of female beauty in Japanese art was "expressed in the description of the costume, [cosmetics], and performance" (Tadashi 2005: 83). This was in contrast to western art's emphasis on the nude figure and the beauty of the body itself. Bijin-ga ("images of beautiful women") was a mainstay of ukiyo-e. Bijin translates as "beautiful person," though in art historical analysis the term specifically denotes beautiful women (or *bijyu*), usually courtesans and their attendants, including geishas.

A geisha (or "art person") was a female entertainer and hostess, who provided companionship at dinner parties and at teahouses (*chaya*). Geishas were often talented poets, calligraphers, and musicians. They were especially noted for playing the *shamisen*, a traditional three-stringed instrument. Geishas' fashionable costumes, "their skill in music and dance, and their spirit and dash appealed to Yoshiwara [and other yukaku] clients. Gradually, they replaced courtesans in popularity and prominence" (Seigle 2005: 121).

Many people visited the pleasure quarters during festivals to see the geishas entertain. Figure 10 shows five geishas of Yoshiwara performing the *binzasara*, a ceremonial springtime dance performed during the annual Niwaka Festival. The dance called on the agricultural deities to bring a fertile growing season. The women wear special flowered hats and kimono and create loud cracking sounds with *hyoshigi*, simple musical instrument consisting of two pieces of bamboo held together with an ornamental rope. Attendees took home woodblock prints of the performance, such as figure 10, as souvenirs to remember the occasion.



Figure 10. Eishosai Choki (active 1786-1808). Binzasara, A Dance with Clappers, ca. 1800.
The Cleveland Museum of Art. CC0.

*Abuna-e* (translated literally as "dangerous images") were one of the forerunners to bijin-ga. Abuna-e also depicted bijyu, though the women portrayed tended to be quite scantily clad, caught in moments of reverie while bathing or washing their hair. Such prints were especially sought after during the 1720s, after government censors placed a ban on even more explicit shun-ga (or "spring images," a euphemism for erotica). Shun-ga gradually reemerged, however, and the government conducted similar crackdowns in the 1770s and later on.

Kitagawa Utamaro (c. 1753-1806) was the acclaimed late master of abuna-e and bijin-ga. The woman in Utamaro's *Woman Drying her Hands* (figure 11) turns her face into a three-quarter pose. Utamaro did not intend the delicate lines delineating her eyes, nose, and "petal-like" lips to suggest a particular individual, but rather to portray a specific character and mood (The Cleveland Museum of Art (c) 2019). Utamaro's print came from a series of "physiognomic portraits," assessments of character through outward appearance. The woman in figure 11 represents "*floating ch'i'*," a "light-hearted type [of personality] defined as a flighty and fickle" (Davis 2005: 151). Utamaro's renown was based on his ability to capture the subtleties of a woman's disposition, whatever her social status.



Figure 11. Kitagawa Utamaro (ca. 1753-1806). Woman Drying her Hands, from the set Ten Types in the
Physiognomic Study of Women, c. 1793.
The Cleveland Museum of Art. CC0.

Utamaro has an interesting life story, though his childhood is something of a mystery. Apparently, a relative brought him as a young man to Edo from a small provincial town. Utamaro may have studied with the scholar and artist Toriyama Seiken (1712-1788) for some time. In 1804, after he achieved considerable fame, Utamaro was embroiled in a public controversy when he created an image of Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537-1598) and his five concubines. Hideyoshi served as the Imperial Regent of Japan and is considered one of the country's "great unifiers." The Tokugawa authorities considered Utamaro's work disrespectful, because he showed the national hero informally cavorting with his female companions. The authorities arrested the artist and he was briefly imprisoned (Davis, 2007). This had an adverse psychological impact and Utamaro died soon thereafter. This unfortunate episode, however, had no impact on his artistic legacy in Japan and elsewhere. His enduring influence will be mentioned again later.

Over time, women of each social class appeared in bijin-ga. During the early eighteenth century, high-ranking courtesans and historical figures were the norm; later, lower-ranking courtesans, geishas, and fictional characters became common subjects. Women were shown engaged in many types of activities, in both public and private settings. Artists, however, consistently attempted to capture the current ideal of beauty, again, usually in terms of "costume, [cosmetics], and performance" (figure 12). The women in Bijin-ga varied, from tall and statuesque models to "petite, waif-like *ingénues*," but, consistently, they were sophisticated and stylish, following, and setting, the latest "fads in feminine beauty" (The Library of Congress (a) 2001). Courtesans and geishas flaunted their ornate kimono, complex hairstyles, and seemingly carefree lifestyles, and served as excellent models for the fashion industry (Seigle 2005: 120). In fact, kimono and other fashion merchants frequently incorporated bijin-ga

images into their advertisements. The cult-like celebrity of courtesans was somewhat akin to that of actresses, singers, and models of contemporary culture. Indeed, fashion trends continue to echo binjin-ga exemplars (figures 12, 13).



Figure 12. Kikugawa Eizan. Courtesan beside Kimono Rack, c. 1860.
The Cleveland Museum of Art. CC0.

Figure 13. Tokyo fashion week, 2016. Public Domain.

## 6. Kabuki

Yukaku were also home to large Kabuki theaters, where visitors sought vicarious pleasure through the uninhibited performances of Kabuki actors. Top Kabuki actors, like the top courtesan entertainers, attained celebrity status.

By the early eighteenth century, the Kabuki theater was the chonin class' most popular form of mass entertainment (along with *sumo* wrestling). Both Kabuki and ukiyo-e printmaking started in the mid-seventeenth century and flourished until the nineteenth century. The two art forms grew in tandem. Kabuki originated in Kyoto, and nearby Osaka, at the center of the Kamigata region (a colloquial term for the modern Kansai region). Kamigata was the traditional focal point of Japanese government and culture. Many chonin art forms began in Kamigata, before the Tokugawa government selected Edo as their base.

Kabuki contrasted with the older, more aristocratic Noh theater (figure 14). Noh, which featured more refined dancing and music and less comedic elements than Kabuki, was favored by the Tokugawa shogunate. The term *kabuki* can be translated as "shocking" or "unusual," and in the seventeenth century Kabuki theaters were reputed to be excessively raucous and somewhat disreputable. As Kabuki became more popular in the Kamigata region and eventually in Edo as well, it became associated with prostitution (Harris 2010: 86-103). Although both males and females originally performed in the Kabuki theaters, the shogunate eventually banned public female performers on moral grounds. Thus, Kabuki became an all-male endeavor. A specialized group of male actors called *onnagata* played the female characters.

Figure 14. Scene from a Noh Play, ca. 1725. Kyoto School.
The Cleveland Museum of Art. CC0.

Theater owners commissioned artists to create Kabuki actor prints (or *yakusha-e*) to sell at play openings or for specific special performances. Today individual Kabuki actor prints can be very expensive, but originally theater promoters used them as inexpensive promotional items, as ephemeral souvenirs. They could be bought for the cost of a bowl of noodles. Artists also produced sets of prints for (more costly) *banzuke*, printed programs sold at *kaomise*, the ceremony that opened the new season of a Kabuki theater and introduced the new troupe of actors.

Yakusha-e and banzuke were very popular because many Kabuki actors were viewed as "cultural icons," a few were "superstars" (The Library of Congress (a) 2001). Audiences familiarized themselves with the intricacies of plots and characters and joined "fan clubs that followed the careers and performances of actors and their ability to interpret commonly known stories. [In Kyoto, fan clubs] would attend performances *en masse*, sometimes dressed in outlandish costumes to give the theater a festive atmosphere, and would try to occupy the front rows" (Harris 2010: 88).

Ukiyo-e artists went to Kabuki troupes' dress rehearsals, so they could accurately represent actors' facial characteristics, makeup, costume, and poses. Artists typically portrayed actors at the dramatic climax of a play, when the actor froze himself for several seconds in a contorted pose called *mie* (figures 15, 16). As the actor held the mie pose, he opened his eyes very wide and, if he was to appear angry, he crossed his eyes as well (figure 16). In actual performances, the actor's fan club and other appreciative members of the audience applauded and shouted the actor's name and words of praise as he struck the mie pose.

Figure 15. Katsukawa Shunko (1743-1812). Actor Ichikawa Yaozo.
The Cleveland Museum of Art. CC0.

Figure 16. Gototei Kunisada. Ichikawa Danjuro as Kan Shojo in the Mt. Tenpai Scene, 1814.
The Cleveland Museum of Art. CC0.

Mie was an important component of the vigorous style of acting known as *aragoto*, which translates as "rough stuff." The basic forms of aragato derived from Japanese martial arts and from Shinto religious dances. *Wagoto*, or the "gentle style," was a more realistic and refined method of Kabuki acting that was diametrically opposed to aragoto. The "leading man" of Hollywood's *golden age* of motion pictures, was the equivalent of the Edo Period wagato character: the romantic hero who falls in love with the leading female character. Often in Kabuki performances, the leading female character (played by a male actor or onnagata) represented the most beautiful courtesan of the pleasure quarter. In a typical storyline, the wagato and female lead escape together from dire circumstances only to realize their love affair is doomed. At the end of the play, they might commit *shinju*, or "double suicide," like William Shakespeare's tragic lovers Romeo and Juliet. Members of the chonin class thrilled to Kabuki's intense melodrama, its passionate acting style, elaborate costumes, and the prestige of its star performers, and they prized yakusha-e prints.

## 7. International influences

Although ukiyo-e prints were central to Japan's visual counterculture from the seventeenth century onward, they were virtually unknown in the western world until the mid-nineteenth century. The reason for this was Japan's prolonged era of isolation under its *sakoku*, or "closed country," policy (1614-1854). The policy was part of the Tokugawa shogunate's effort to strengthen its authority, by excluding the practice of Christianity, drastically curtailing international trade, and prohibiting Japanese nationals from traveling abroad. The isolation was not complete though; the shogunate granted Dutch, Chinese, and Korean tradesmen limited access to Japan. However, only one port, Nagasaki, was open to Dutch and Chinese ships. The Dutch operated their trading post on an artificial island named Dejima in Nagasaki's harbor.

The Tokugawa authorities allowed sporadic interactions between the Japanese people and the Dutch on Dejima. In 1740, the ruling shogun, Tokugawa Yoshimune (1684-1751) sent scholars to Dejima to translate European books into Japanese. Artists used this opportunity to produce woodblock reproductions of the western engraved illustrations. The foreign aesthetics proved influential on a few ukiyo-e artists. Italian Renaissance techniques for

suggesting depth on a two-dimensional surface, such as *vanishing points* and *linear perspective*, began to appear in Japanese *uki-e* prints. Uki-e translates as either "flowing pictures" or "floating pictures." "Flowing" alluded to the phenomenon "whereby the gaze of the viewer was drawn [or flowed] into the depth of the composition. "Floating" suggests the manner in which objects or people in pictures seemed to float outward toward the viewer" (Schlombs 2007: 35). The artists who created figures 17 and 18 used these western artistic methods. Figure 17 shows the interior of Edo's Nakamura Kabuki theater; figure 18 shows the Nihonbashi Bridge at the Edo terminus of the Tokaido Road. The Nihonbashi Bridge is also in figure 5.
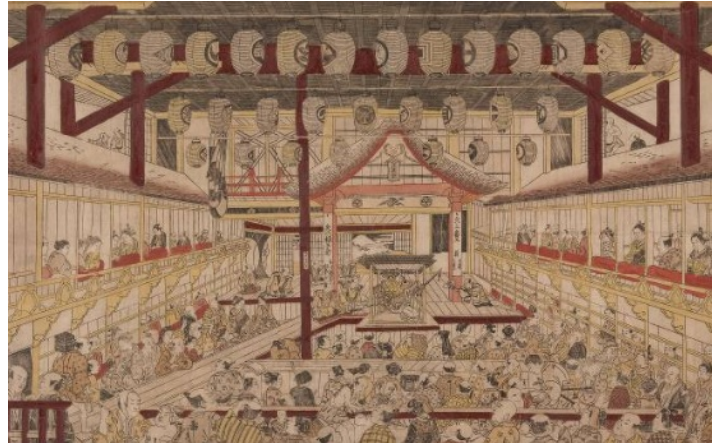


Figure 17. Okumura Masanobu (1686-1764). Perspective View of Nakamura Theater, 1740.
The Cleveland Museum of Art. CC0.



Figure 18. Katsushika Hokusai. Nihonbashi, Edo, from Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji, 1830s.
The Art Institute of Chicago. CC0.

Japan's period of isolation lasted until 1853, when American Navy Commodore Matthew Perry (1794-1858) landed in Edo Bay and used *gunboat diplomacy* to force Japan to open its ports to American trade. When Yokohama's port opened to foreign trade in 1859, artists of the Utagawa school came to feed a local demand for images of the foreign visitors pouring into the city. The artists created a sub-genre of ukiyo-e, called *Yokohama-e*, by fusing Japanese printmaking traditions with novel aspects of western art (figure 19). Yokohama-e was produced even after the Tokugawa shogunate came to an end and practical imperial rule resumed under the Meiji Restoration (1867-1868). Figure 19 is a Meiji Period landscape, rather than an Edo Period landscape. It shows an American *clipper*, a type of merchant sailing ship, leaving Yokohama harbor laden with merchandise headed for a European or American port of trade.

Figure 19. Utagawa Hiroshige III (1842-1894). True View of Yokohama, 1875.
The Art Institute of Chicago. CC0.

Immediately after the opening of Japan, "a tidal wave of imports flooded European shores" (Ives 2004). Japanese *bric-à-brac*, craftwork, and art objects became ubiquitous. They were in every ethnographic museum, art gallery, *curiosité* shop, and private collection in London and Paris. After visiting Japanese pavilions at the Great London Exposition (1862) and the Paris Exposition Universelle (1867), French art critic Philippe Burty (1830-1890) coined the term *Japonisme*. Burty was an important critical supporter of the French Impressionists. Japonisme described a new field of western artistic, historic, and ethnographic inquiry, borrowing from the arts of Japan. Critics now use the term more bluntly, to denote European and American appropriation of Japanese artistic techniques and styles (The Ronin Gallery 2016).

Ukiyo-e had an immediate impact on avant-garde artists, particularly in France. The pictorial strategies of Japanese prints offered an attractive alternative to the techniques and styles that the western art academies had taught since the Renaissance. Ukiyo-e prints arrived in Europe at the precise moment early French modernists were initiating a revolution in the arts. Modern artists challenged the assumption that images should be veristic and moved beyond the limitations of painting and sculpture to explore other media, such as experimental printmaking. Emulating Japanese aesthetics and methods seemed like one avenue to achieve modern art's goals. In addition, ukiyo-e art and early modern art sprang from similar social contexts. The Japanese prints reflected the chonin class' unconventional counterculture of Kabuki theaters and pleasure quarters. Similarly, the early modern art movements most affected by ukiyo-e, particularly Impressionism and Post-Impressionism, reflected the decadent, theatrical world of Paris' bohemian district of Montmartre.

Mary Cassatt (1844-1926) was an American painter and printmaker. She moved to Paris and became a close associate of the French Impressionist Edgar Degas (1834-1917). Today, Cassatt is beloved for her portrayals of the intimate lives of women. In 1890, Cassatt and Degas viewed an exhibition of Japanese prints at the École Nationale des Beaux-Arts in Paris. The show included over seven hundred prints owned by prominent French collectors. Cassatt was entranced and began her own collection of prints by Hiroshige, Hokusai, and Utamaro. She also began a series of ten *aquatint* and *drypoint* prints, she said, "with the intention of attempting an imitation of Japanese methods" (Warchol 2013). Cassatt's experiments impressed one of the leading Impressionists, Camille Pissarro (1830-1903). "The result[s]," Pissarro proclaimed, "[are] admirable, as beautiful as Japanese work." Woman Bathing is from Cassatt's series (figure 20).

Figure 20. Mary Cassatt. Woman Bathing, 1891.
The Art Institute of Chicago. CC0.

Figure 21. Kitagawa Utamaro. Takashima Ohisa, c. 1795.
The Art Institute of Chicago. CC0.

Kitagawa Utamaro was among the first ukiyo-e artists to gain widespread fame in Europe. Utamaro's innovative, elegant renderings of women captivated Impressionists, Post-Impressionists, and Symbolists (Ives 1974; see also Mikhaiova & Steele 2008: 39-40). Figure 21 is Utamaro's portrait of Ohisa, a member of the Takashima family. Ohisa looks into a mirror and studies the arrangement of her hair and the application of her cosmetics. Utamaro employed a clever compositional trick: the two mirrors allow viewers to see Ohisa from behind and to see her face simultaneously. Ohisa was a favorite subject for several ukiyo-e artists. Her father owned a chain of Edo cake-shops named Takashimaya, and she served tea at the cake-shop located near the Ryogoku Bridge, which spanned the Sumida River very near the Nihonbashi Bridge (see figures 5 and 18). The Takashima family crest, with three encircled oak leaves, is on the back of one of Ohisa's mirrors.

Karabana Tadaaya celebrated Ohisa's beauty in a poem of 1792 (The British Museum 2019), which is translated,

Charms and tea are brimming over
And neither gets cold!
Let me not wake
From this lucky dream of the New Year
At Takashimaya.

Mary Cassatt's Woman Bathing shares many qualities with Utamaro's portrait. Cassatt presents her model in what would have usually been a private moment, as she dips her hands into a ceramic basin on a washstand and bathes herself. Cassatt paid special attention to the lovely curving line of the model's exposed back, but also suggested her face in the mirror's reflection. As mentioned earlier, western artists tended to emphasize the beauty of the nude figure or the body itself, while ukiyo-e artists expressed female beauty through descriptions of costume, cosmetics, and performance.

Cassatt's Japanese influences are evident. The golden floral decoration on the pitcher at the model's feet is Japanese, as is the matching decoration in the blue carpeting. Furthermore, the general flattening of forms, compression of space, and bold patterning of the woman's robe reveal an awareness of Japanese aesthetics. Woman

Bathing was included in Cassatt's first solo exhibition at the Durand-Ruel gallery in Paris, which critics warmly praised. The exhibition helped establish Cassatt's lasting reputation as a leading modern printmaker.

Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (1864-1901) was one of the most colorful French avant-garde artists. Upon reaching the age of 21, he received a stipend from his father, an eccentric nobleman, and he set up a studio in Montmartre. Toulouse-Lautrec's favorite subjects were the prostitutes working in Montmartre's brothels and the performers entertaining in Montmartre's theaters and music halls, particularly at the famed Moulin Rouge cabaret. The artist was also an avid collector of Japanese prints and he incorporated their characteristics into his own work. Like ukiyo-e prints, Toulouse-Lautrec's images celebrate the "women of pleasure" and entertainers of an urban counterculture (Myers 2007).



Figure 22. Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. Jane Avril, 1899.
The Art Institute of Chicago. CC0.

Figure 23. Toshusai Sharaku. The Actor Sawamura Sujuro III as Nagoya Sanza, 1794.
The Art Institute of Chicago. CC0.

In 1899, Toulouse-Lautrec created a lithographic portrait of Jane Avril (1868-1943), a legendary singer and dancer who performed at the Moulin Rouge (figure 23). Avril entranced audiences with her idiosyncratic serpentine style of dancing; she slowly swayed and twisted in a manner evoking the writhing of a snake. In Toulouse-Lautrec's lithograph, the blue and yellow snake printed on her dress wraps around Avril's body, seemingly menacingly, accentuating her movements.

The French artist's portrait shared many of the conventions of Toshusai Sharaku's portrait of Sawamura Sujuro III, a famed actor of Edo's Kabuki theater (figure 23). Figures 22 and 23 each depict a performer striking a melodramatic pose, as well as flattened forms, a monochromatic background, and stylized, calligraphic text. Toshusai Sharaku is a mysterious figure. He produced over 140 woodblock prints, mostly of Kabuki actors, during a ten-month period and then disappeared from the historical record. Art historians speculate that conservative Tokugawa censors condemned Shakura's dramatic portrayals and controversial subject matter, and put an end to his career (Davis, 2005, pp. 158-160). The character shown in figure 23, Nagoya Sanza, is from the play Keisei sanbon karakasa (or "The Three Parasols of the Courtesan"). The character Nagoya Sanza was a samurai of the ruling class who battled his rival, Fuwa Banzaemon, for the love of a courtesan named Katsuragi on the streets of Edo's Yoshiwara pleasure district. The government censors clearly did not want the samurai class to be so intimately associated with Yoshiwara's chonin counterculture in ukiyo-e prints (see figure 7).

## 8. Conclusion

Ukiyo-e's great influence on Cassatt, Toulouse-Lautrec, and other western modern artists occurred after the Edo Period ended. In the late 1860s, following years of struggle, the Tokugawa shogunate surrendered its authority and the Meiji Emperor (1852-1912) was elevated to the position of head of state and symbol of authority. By the start of the Meiji Period (1868-1912), many of the great ukiyo-e print designers, Utamaro, Hiroshige, and Hokusai, for example, were dead. The Meiji era was a time when cultural traditions were called into question or were abandoned altogether. "Print artists were no longer bound by a single avenue" (Merritt 2010: 241) and many Meiji printmakers adopted styles that included or, in certain instances, were dominated by western characteristics.

New printmakers also signified a changing society. The early Meiji Period witnessed the breakdown of the old Tokugawa social hierarchy, and many members of the chonin class rose to high official positions (Norman 2000: 61-62). As Japan reengaged with the rest of the world, Yoshiwara and the other pleasure quarters began a steady decline in popularity. Yukaku cultural practices, including the Kabuki performances, seemed increasingly disconnected from a quickly evolving modern society. The government passed an "anti-prostitution law" in 1956 and closed down Yoshiwara and the other pleasure quarters, effectively ending Japan's distinctive courtesan culture (Graham, 2016, p. 209). The vibrant world of the Edo Period's floating world, however, continues to live on in the printed images of ukiyo-e.

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