

Andreas Marks: Japanese Woodblock Prints (1680–1938)

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Review by Uta Lauer

Certainly a big splash and yes, the iconic „Great Wave (Under the Great Wave of Kanagawa / Kanagawa-oki nami-ura)“ by Hokusai (1760–1849) is also in the book (catalog number 111, pages 352–354). As a highly readable book review is already available (Laflamme 2020), I will here focus on a few points perhaps a bit off the beaten track but nevertheless noteworthy.

Of course a bibliography on the topic of Japanese woodblock prints can not be exhaustive but it would have been an added benefit for the European, especially the German reader, if important collections and publications such as (Kozyreff et al. 1989) for Brussels, (Schulze et al. 2016) for Hamburg, (Schulenburg 2009) for Frankfurt am Main or (Mayr et al. 2003) for Heidelberg and again (Mayr et al. 2004) for Frankfurt am Main to name just a few would have been included in the bibliography. Japanese technical terms listed separately in an appendix would have been useful. The quality of the reproductions of the prints does not live up to expectation.

Each print is set in historical, cultural and artistic context. Inscriptions on the prints are either translated or if too long, paraphrased.

Utawaga Toyoharu (1735–1814) is credited as the first Japanese artist to use Western one-point perspective to depict outdoor scenes. This he did very successfully in the unique print, „Picture of Watōnai Sankan“ (cat.nr. 36, pp. 146–147). Unique, because it seems to be the only extant print from a series called „Perspective Pictures of Foreign Lands“. Perspective pictures in Japanese are *uki-e* 浮絵. The knowledge of one-point perspective was initially gained through Chinese translations of European books. Watōnai is the main character in a kabuki play based on the life and adventures of Coxinga (1624–1662), who at some stage had proclaimed himself king of Taiwan. Coxinga was well known in Japan because his mother Tagawa Matsu was Japanese and the famous Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653–1723) had written a very popular bunraku puppet-play about Coxinga.

Japanese craftsmen and artisans were quick to adept foreign things to Japanese sensibilities like the beautifully red-laquered telescope with sprinkeled-on gold powder through which a young lady looks into the distance in Hokusai's (yes, the very same) luxury print „Women with Parasol and Telescope“ (cat.nr. 86, pp. 282–283).

Money and marketing played a vital role in the business of making and publishing *ukyo-e* prints. Around 1824 the relatively unknown artist Eisen (1790–1848) designed „Woman putting on Face Powder“ (cat.nr. 102, pp. 324–325). The text next to the cartouche advertises white, fragrant facepowder for women made by a

certain Mr. Sakamoto. This is perhaps the earliest case of product placement known in the world.

Chinese novels like „Watermargin (Shuihuzhuan)“ were bestsellers in Japan and illustrations of the fearsome warriors were in high demand. Kuniyoshi (1798–1861) who was a specialist in images of heroes designed „Flea on a Drum – Shi Qian“ (cat. nr. 107, pp. 336–337) as part of a series depicting „108 Heroes of the Popular Watermargin“.

In eighteenth-century Prussia, men of exceptional height (above 1.88 meters) often recruited into special battalions of the army, were nick-named „Lange Kerle“. In Japan Ikezuki Geitazaemon (1827–1850) who reached a towering height of 2.27 meters and weighed 169 kilograms became a sumo wrestler. He almost never won a tournament and was always regarded as an anomaly. A very touching print by Kunisada (1786–1865) shows a portrait of the wrestler superimposed on an imprint of Ikezukis’s right hand. To this day, the print of a sumo wrestler’s hand is a kind of autograph.

The Chinese Confucian concept of 24 paragons of filial piety (ershisi xiao) received some quite strange adaptations in Japan, among them „Biographies of Heroic Generals of Kai and Echigo Province: Takeda Clan, Twenty-Four Generals“. Kuniyoshi (1798–1861) dramatically put the gruesome suicide of „General Morozumi Bungo-no-kami Masakiyo (died 1561) of the Takeda clan“ (cat.nr. 144, pp. 434–435) in print. His sword directed towards himself, Masakiyo deliberately steps on a landmine and is blown to pieces. Landmines already used in 16th century Japanese warfare, still a threat to life in many parts of the world today.

Disputed islands in the South China Sea have long been an issue between the contending countries. During the Sino-Japanese of 1894/95 war photographs were still relatively rare. Since the ban on illustrating contemporary incidents had been repealed in 1869, print designers took the opportunity to depict current events. Kobayashi Kiyochika’s (1847–1915) „Picture of Our Elite Forces Occupying the Taiwanese Pescadores Islands“ (p. 456) shows soldiers fighting in the dark of the night, their reflections visible in a stretch of water owing to raging flames in the background consuming a city gate.

Kawanabe Kyôsei’s print „Kyôsei’s One Hundred Lunacies: Infinite Prayers“ (cat. nr. 163, pp. 300–303) at first glance seems to depict just an octopus encircled by a Buddhist string of prayer surrounded by various people and demons. A closer look reveals this complex image to be a satirical image of the five Western powers that forced Japan into unfavourable trade treaties (the United States, the Netherlands, Russia, England and France).

Today, the print-designer Ogata Gekkô (1859–1920) is almost forgotten but in his time, he was among the chosen few to attend the Chicago World Fair in 1893 and show his prints and the art of making ukyio-e at the Japanese Pavilion, a replica of the Hôden-Hall of Byôdôyin temple in Uji near Kyoto. One of the thousands of

visitors to the fair was the young architect Frank Lloyd-Wright (1867-1959) whose work subsequently was imbued with Japanese aesthetics and designs. An English guidebook written by Okakura Kakuzō (1862–1913), the later Asian Arts curator at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and author of „The Book of Tea“, introduced the various arts and crafts of Japan. In 1895, Gekkō made a print of „Yokosuka Naval Base, Picture of People Watching the Warship Zhenyuan“ (cat. nr. 177, pp. 538–540). The „Zhenyuan“, equipped with Krupp guns, had been built by the AG Vulcan shipyard in Stettin, then Germany, between 1882 and 1884 for the Chinese Beiyang fleet. After the battle of Weihaiwei in 1895, Japan seized the ship as war booty. At the naval base of Yokosuka the iron-clad turrent ship was repaired and henceforth served the Japanese Navy.

Gekkō's disciple Kōka (Yamamura Kōka/ Toyonari, 1886–1942) who was also a painter in the „Nihon-ga style (a modernized form of traditional Japanese painting)“ literally carved a name for himself by reviving the classical actor print. His „The Actor Morita Kan'ya XIII as Jean Valjean“ (cat. 187, pp. 578–579) portrays the villain from Victor Hugo's novel „Les Misérables. The print was based on a bromide photo, black and white photos of celebrities called „buromaido ブロマイド in Japanese.

When the Second World War broke out in 1939 the art of making ukyio-e prints collapsed almost completely. Only a few print-designers continued with shin hanga (new prints) after the war.

„Japanese Woodblock Prints (1680–1938)“ covers the whole period of ukyio-e from its beginning to its demise and takes the reader on a fascinating, cross-cultural and international journey.

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