Ukiyo-e, Japanese Wood Block Printing

By Sharon Burns

The Tokugawa shoguns maintained a harshly controlled feudal society for over 250 years beginning in the middle 1500s. Creativity came from the lower classes in the Confucian social hierarchy, the artisans and merchants. Because of the Japanese self imposed isolationism, the traditions of the past were revised and refined. By the end of the seventeenth century, three distinct types of creative expression flourished. The center of the Edo culture was the Yoshiwara area where talented courtesans of the tea houses and actors of the Kabuki theater were the popular idols of their day.

Wearing exaggerated make-up, wigs and elaborate costumes, Kabuki actors provided endless subjects for a new art form, Ukiyo-e or “pictures of the floating (or passing) world”. These fully costumed stars posed as characters in famous theatrical scenes and played as many as nine roles in one play, males playing both men and women. The Kabuki actor portrayed themes such as tragic love affairs ending in double suicides, stories of deceased and wronged lovers, and escapades of legendary warriors. The colorful, bold and beautifully decorative wood block prints were the posters and pinups of their day. They were collected by adoring fans. For historical purposes, unfortunately, many were discarded as they became worn and faded. Woodblock prints of the Edo period appealed to wealthy townspeople of their day.

The woodblock as a means of printing was originally developed in China during the T’ang Dynasty. It was introduced to Japan in the eighth century. The art of block printing was fully developed 10 centuries later. It was a masterful collaboration between the artist, who had been selected and commissioned by the publisher, who was often a bookseller. He chose the theme and often added color notations. Engravers were woodcutting specialists who transferred the lines onto woodblocks, a separate block for each color. Two and three color prints were common during the first half of the 1800’s and full blown multicolored prints soon became popular, some requiring up to 20 woodblocks. Then the printer did the actual print execution. Often the engraver and printer were anonymous.

The print image was first designed by the artist on paper then transferred to a thin, partly transparent paper. A wooden block usually of cherry wood would have the paper pasted on it. A skilled wood carver would use chisels and create the image in the negative. The printer would apply the ink to the block and rub a round pad over the back of a piece of paper laid on top of the wood block to make the print. To print with precision using a number of wood blocks required a system of placing two cuts on the edge of each block to serve as alignment guides. The preferred paper was made from the inner bark of the mulberry tree. It was strong enough to withstand the numerous rubbings on the various woodblocks. Thousands of reproductions could be made using this method until the carvings on the woodblock became worn. The print offered a means
of inexpensive reproduction and wide distribution. Many times each of these prints would cost as little as a bowl of noodles.

Hokusai (1760 – 1849) was a designer of book covers and billboards. He was famous for his landscapes. His "Thirty-Six Views of Mt. Fuji" includes "The Wave" (as it is known in the West), perhaps the most widely known Ukiyo-e print in the world. Ando Hiroshige (1797-1858) was a Japanese woodblock printmaker who was influenced by Hokusai. He is considered one of the greatest Ukiyo-e masters. He began his career with prints of beautiful women. As the political atmosphere became more repressive, he turned to the art of daily life amid the Japanese landscape. In 1832, Hiroshige traveled from Edo to Kyoto on the Tokaido Road, which inspired his famous woodblock print series "Fifty-Three Stations of the Tokaido Road."

“One Hundred Famous Views of Edo, the last of his many series of woodblock prints, acts as a great summing up, for it offers a geographic and seasonal panorama of Edo (modern Tokyo), the shogun’s capital city and the locale that Hiroshige personally knew best."  

Utagawa Kunisada (1786 – 1864) was the leading designer of Kabuki actor prints. His prints captured not only the likeness of the actor but their stage presence and the distinctive qualities they brought to their roles. In his later years, his work challenged the printer because it featured fine pigments, carved details, and difficult printing techniques such as shading and layered colors.

Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1798 – 1861), the son of a silk dyer, was born Yoshizo. Some of his work came to the attention of one of the great masters of the Japanese woodblock print, Toyokuni I. He was officially admitted to Toyokuni's studio in 1811, and became one of his chief pupils. He remained an apprentice until 1814, when he was given the name Kuniyoshi and set out as an independent artist. Like many artists, he struggled to make a living and ended up repairing floor mats. A chance encounter with Kunisada prompted Kuniyoshi to redouble his efforts to be a successful artist. He then produced a number of heroic triptychs which were well thought of, and in 1827 he started the series, the Suikoden, or "Hundred and Eight Chinese Heroes". He was also a successful landscape painter. In the 1840s he continued to produce many prints, among them many triptychs of bijin and heroes. His studio was overrun with cats and many of his paintings and prints contained drawings of the felines, sometimes peeking out from a corner.

1 30,000 Years of Art, 2007, Phaidon Press Limited, New York, page 883


http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/ukiy/hd_ukiy.htm

http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/ukiyo-e

http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/ukiyo-e/major.html