

JAPANESE COLOR PRINTS

THE HENRY L. PHILLIPS COLLECTION

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In the last decade two important collections of Japanese color prints have been acquired by the Museum: the Mansfield collection, which was received in 1936 and presented to the public in a special exhibition from December 6, 1946, to January 5, 1947, and the Henry L. Phillips collection, which came to the Museum by bequest in 1940. The Phillips collection may now be seen in a special exhibition in Gallery D 6 and the balcony galleries of the Great Hall, where it will remain on view until the middle of February, 1948. The collection will then be placed in the Print Room.

The bitter question of the power of art as propaganda for good or evil will not be discussed by me in these pages, but I think it is not amiss to report what happened last winter when the Museum exhibited Japanese prints for the first time in many years. Quite simply, the press and the public welcomed them. When one remembers the touse about German music that followed the opening of the war in 1914 one is tempted to think that the present period, in this respect at least, is more intelligent and mature than that of thirty years ago.

Since Japanese color prints first began to come to the West in the latter half of the nineteenth century they have had many admirers. The recent years of war, and especially the last two, have brought about a tremendous increase of interest. Americans generally, and especially the young, are interested in the Far East. Japa-

nese children, for their part, are busily learning the Virginia reel, the Cherry Dancers are taking up the routines of the Rockettes, and soon (if it has not happened already) the youth of Japan will be introduced to the whole wide

modern world through the representations in our countless picture magazines and comic strips.

It is neither flippant nor far-fetched to say that our picture magazines and comic strips reflect the passing scene of our day and that the prints reflect the passing scene of their day; but the analogy should not be pushed too far. Both are pictures of the passing moment, there

are likenesses; but it is wrong to insist upon them. To say, also, that Japanese color prints took the place in Yedo (Tokyo) that our theater posters, fashion plates, and colored postcards of famous beauty spots take in New York is one of those quarter truths that confuse people. The statement is true as far as it goes; but the times are different, the places are different, the people are different. Why can we not let well enough alone and enjoy what the fates give us? In the color prints the fates have given us a sympathetic and poetic record of the things that caught the fancy of city people in Japan for a good hundred and fifty years and more. Better, then, to look and enjoy than to moralize. (Ruskin, a stern moralist, had his troubles with Venetian painting.)

The prints are part of a school of painting that the Japanese themselves called *Ukiyoye*—

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A courtesan, with two attendants. Book illustration in black and white, by Nishikawa Sukenobu (1671-1751). H. 10¼ inches. The prints reproduced in this article are in the Phillips collection.

“Pictures of the Floating World,” “Pictures of the Passing Scene.” Thanks to them, we of the present day can see the changing pageant of the years in Tokyo. We can watch the long procession of beautiful women, observe their delicious eccentricities in dress and hair arrangement, and be dumbfounded, as we are here in the present day, by the changing ideal not only in hair arrangement and dress but in actual physical conformation. It is bewildering. Perhaps Stella Benson’s observation that “men are akin to sheep as well as to monkeys, and the theory needs only a Darwin to trace the connection” applies to women too; though she goes on to say: “I have yet to meet the man who, where women are concerned, does not follow in the track of others of his kind. I think that very few men conceive an original preference for a woman unbiassed by the public tendency” (*I Pose*, London, Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1930, p. 122).

Just as we have a record of the famous beauties, we have a record of the stage in the actor prints. Not only are they brilliant theatrical posters in miniature; they are an introduction to the plays themselves, and so to much of the heroic history and legend of the people. In the nineteenth century nature subjects became popular—landscapes and delightful birds and flowers.

In so far as the prints depict things that appeal to most people, in so far as the fashions in dress are reflected in them, there is a wisp of likeness in the illustrative content of the prints to some kinds of Western art. But there the likeness ends, because the prints, however common and mundane their subject matter, are an offshoot of a long tradition of painting, and from the the start they were bound to have those qualities of draughtmanship, of color, and of line that have made the parent school greatly admired.



O-Sen sweeping up her love letters. By Suzuki Harunobu (1725-1770). O-Sen was a celebrated beauty of the Kagiya, a teahouse at Kasamori shrine. H. 11 $\frac{1}{8}$ inches

The prints were made in the following way: The artist drew the design on thin paper, then the engraver pasted it face downward on a flat block of wood (usually cherry), scraped the paper away at the back until the design showed clearly, and cut away the wood in the areas that were not to be inked, leaving the design standing free. This block was printed in black, and the color was filled in by hand. When, eventu-

ally, color was printed, rather than painted, within the black outlines of the design, other blocks were made in which only the areas where color was desired formed the printing surface. Before printing, rice paste was mixed with the colors to keep them from running.

The early prints, as has been noted, were in black and white; these were characterized by great vigor and boldness of line and were col-



Portrait of a woman. From the Six Tama Rivers series, by Kitagawa Utamaro (1753-1806). A poem is illustrated at the right. H. 14½ inches

ored by hand. Not until about 1742 was color applied by means of secondary wood blocks, a process accredited to Okamura Masanobu. An additional color block came into use about 1755. In 1764 the printer Kinroku perfected a method by which any reasonable number of blocks and colors could be used.

Some of our print historians speak of the early print-makers as "primitive" and of the

late ones as "decadent." Surely these terms are inappropriate. Primitive is an odd word to use for Moronobu, for instance, who happens to be the first print-maker, but whose work derives from a body of painting which had flourished for a thousand years. Nor is there any good reason for calling Utamaro and his contemporaries decadent. Least of all does the term "downfall" by which historians refer to the late

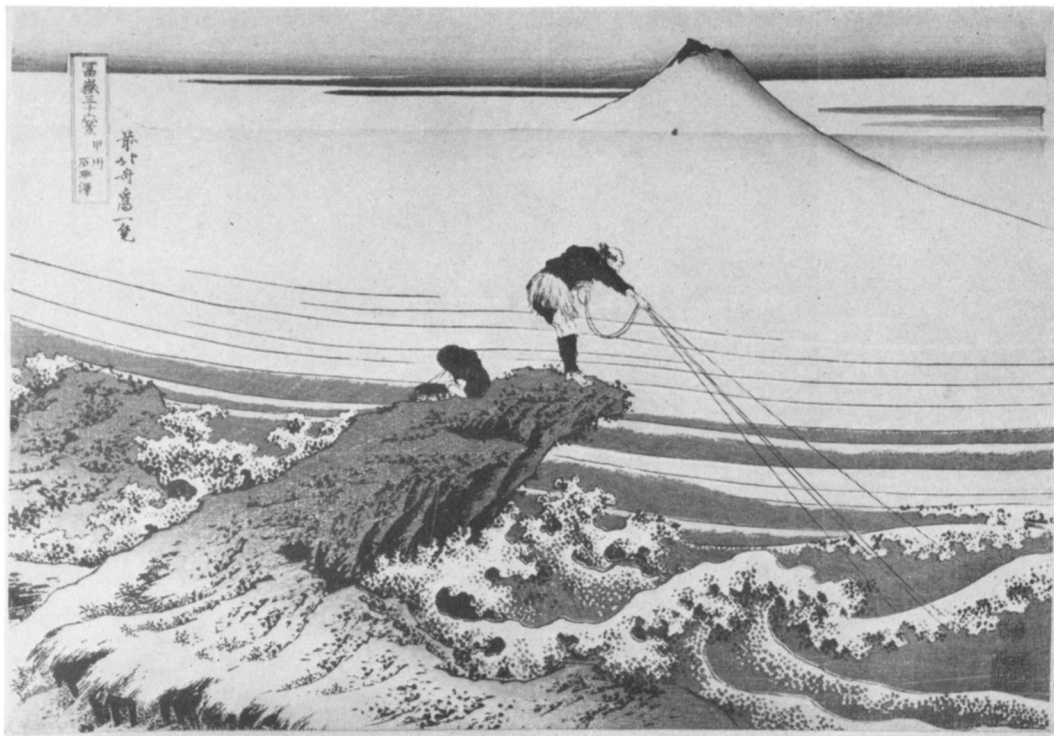


The actor Bando Hikosaburo III as he appeared in the drama "Sugawara no Michizane." By Katsukawa Shunyei (1768-1819). H. 15¼ inches

period of Japanese prints apply to the great poet landscapists of the nineteenth century.

The Phillips collection of some two hundred and fifty prints, including the smaller type known as surimono, reflects the special interests of Mr. and Mrs. Phillips. It covers the entire field of polychrome print-making from the early hand-colored prints on, emphasizing the periods of Harunobu and Utamaro (especially

the actor prints and Shunsho) and the great landscape masters Hokusai and Hiroshige. The group of Hiroshiges contains many fine examples from the series of highways, both the Tokaido and the Kisokaido, from the Famous Views of Kyoto; all of the Eight Views of the Environs of Yedo; all of the Eight Views of Lake Biwa; three triptychs, the Kiso Mountains in Snow, the Rapids at Naruto, and Full



ABOVE: *The lone fisherman*. From the series *Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji*, by Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849). BELOW: *Asukayama in the snow at evening*. From the series *Eight Views of the Environs of Yedo*, by Utagawa Hiroshige (1797-1858). H. 10¼ and 9¼ inches



The actor Kataoka Nizayemon in ceremonial robes. The right-hand leaf of a diptych, by Utagawa Toyokuni (1769-1825). H. 14¹/₁₆ inches

Moon at Kanazawa; and others. The Hokusai group includes complete sets of the Waterfalls and the rare Ryukyu Island series, all of the forty-six views of Mount Fuji known as the Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji, eleven of the Famous Bridges, and many of the Hundred Poems Explained by the Nurse. The quality of the collection is excellent throughout.

Much of the information in this article is drawn from Frederick William Gookin's Japanese Color Prints and Their Designers (New York, 1913). Other helpful books on Japanese prints are Arthur Davidson Ficke's Chats on Japanese Prints (London, 1915) and Robert Laurence Binyon's Japanese Colour Prints (London, 1923).