

### **A Floating Life: Japanese woodblock print collection**

These woodblock prints from the collection of Dr. Gary Hickey follow the evolution of this medium from its fascinating beginnings in Edo Period Japan (1600–1868) through to modern times.

By the eighteenth century, the once small fishing village situated of Edo (now modern day Tokyo) was the capital of Japan and, with a population of more than a million people; it was the most populous city in the world. As the seat of power, Edo was a samurai city where the elite administrative and military personnel of the shogun resided. The *chōnin* (lower class townsmen), the group to which the merchants and financiers belonged, were indispensable to the growth of Edo city and grew increasingly wealthy. However, their lack of political power led them to channel this wealth into the pursuit of pleasure. The cultivated tastes that were fostered by these pursuits were the distinguishing feature of the culture of the Edo period.

The increasing affluence of the *chōnin* meant that the downtown districts, particularly the Yoshiwara pleasure quarters and Kabuki theatres where the more prosperous and free-spending *chōnin* entertained themselves, became the cultural focus of city life. Woodblock print images by artists including centred on these forms of entertainment were the popular art-forms of their age.

To express their indulgent attitude to a life lived for the moment; the *chōnin* chose the word *ukiyo*, meaning 'floating world'. Such an attitude was conducive to a life in which pleasures could be enjoyed in a sophisticated and playful manner. In the late Edo period, an increasing interest in travel became another important focus of *chōnin* culture.

A revival of the ancient art of making woodblock prints in the mid-seventeenth century gave rise to high levels of expertise and a great variety of technical developments. The production of full-colour prints followed the development of a technique of aligning on separate wood blocks the several sheets that correspond to the various colours of the image. These full-colour prints gave expression to the costumes, make-up and coiffure of the popular figures of pleasure and entertainment.

While *ukiyo-e* artists also painted pictures, it was the print medium that was best able to satisfy the tastes of the *chōnin*. For the equivalent price of a bowl of noodles or a haircut, or half the price of the cheapest admission to a Kabuki theatre, curious townspeople could buy a print, paste it to the wall or pass it amongst themselves in order to admire and discuss the latest depictions of popular actors, or lust after beautiful courtesans while delighting in their luxurious attire. They could also purchase albums of illicit erotica, which could be kept for private viewing at intimate moments. Other subjects included landscape and images of warriors. The ephemeral nature of this popular, affordable art symbolised the transient world of *ukiyo-e* pleasures.

Despite the rapid westernization that overtook Japan after the Edo period, this traditional medium played a crucial role in the naissance of the modern print. Pre-war modern print artists like Hasui, Yoshida and Saito, sought expression through traditional subject matter such as landscape in a medium that, although rooted in tradition, held the seeds of a new artistic vision.

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