THE FROZEN GESTURE
KABUKI PRINTS FROM THE COLLECTION
OF THE CABINET D'ARTS GRAPHIQUES

CABINET D'ARTS GRAPHIQUES DU MUSÉE D'ART ET D'HISTOIRE, GENEVA

Note: All technical terms marked by a star * are defined in a separate glossary.

Kabuki theatre and ukiyo-e images

Kabuki* is a traditional theatre form which appeared around 1600. It constitutes one of three major theatre forms in Japan, beside no* and bunraku*. Characteristic for kabuki is a particular dramatic repertoire, the use of music and dance, as well as spectacular visual effects. Overall the plays include exaggerated movements, sophisticated costumes, remarkable makeup, and fantastic hairdos. The acting of the actors is very emphatic and stylized, often featuring traditional choreography. The dramas deal with either ancient drama or contemporary scandals, and were often placed in mythological or historical settings. They often evoked moral conflicts, love affairs, personal tragedies or supernatural events. The language used in the play is often archaic, and the subtleties of the expressions are sometimes difficult for modern audiences to understand.

Kabuki theatres owed a great deal of their popularity to the visual promotion which accompanied it, mostly through woodblock prints, though sometimes also through paintings. These works of art form part of a middle-class culture established during the Edo period* and were closely linked to a world of pleasure, called ukiyo* (lit. "floating world"). This culture of a separate world included various enticing activities that invited visitors to the pleasure quarters of the capital: the theatres, brothels, and tea houses.

The images made for the visitors to this separate world are called ukiyo-e*. The majority are woodcuts, i.e., prints created through the use of wooden blocks. They are the result of the collaboration of various professionals. First, an editor orders a composition from an artist, who draws it on thin paper. The carver then transfers this composition to a wooden block and cuts it in a way to keep the areas with lines and printing zones untouched. Once completed, the printer pulls proofs by putting a sheet of paper onto the inked block. However, contrary to Western procedures, this is not done by the use of a printing press, but by hand printing.
The first theatre images were limited to calligraphic texts on sliding doors, and the first true actor prints appeared from artists affiliated with the school of Katsukawa, notably by Katsukawa Shunshō (1726-1792). He was the first artist to provide naturalistic likenesses, i.e., recognisable portraits of actors. Before then, most of the figures had stereotypical features with only slight differentiation in expressions.

Colour impressions started to appear around 1720, first in illustrated books and later in single sheets. They replaced the tedious applications of colour by the brush and constituted a major technological development for commercial publishers. During the 1760s, this technique became so advanced that multicolour printing (nishiki-e*) considerably increased the production and diffusion of prints. During the 19th century, about half of the production of all prints produced in Japan was in some way connected to kabuki.

The collection

The collection of Japanese woodblock prints in the Cabinet d'arts graphiques was mostly established through gifts, bequests, and purchases between 1937 and the 1960s. The rare and unusual Japanese prints in the collection promises to be of great interest for specialists as well as for wider audiences. Despite their importance, however, the prints of the collection have not been shown for several decades. This exhibition therefore aims to shed some light on some aspects of the collection in various ways.

Gallery 1

The first gallery provides a general introduction into the techniques of Japanese woodblock prints and into the development of ukiyo-e. The prints have precise functions, as well as particular ways of production and distribution; they had to be made in perfect coherence with the expectations of their public.

The e-kanban* for example, constitutes a spectacular type of ukiyo-e art. As large paintings for public display and posted on wooden panels, they are usually shown on the exteriors of theatres in order to promote kabuki plays. Contrary to prints, these paintings had to be seen from far away and were therefore created in a much stronger range of colours and featured much more dramatic action. Very often they combined various scenes from the same play, giving the viewers a visual synopsis of the entire play. In contrast, woodblock prints concentrated on specific dramatic moments during the performance. However, the treatment of the actors in the paintings is often similar in those of the prints, notably in the makeup, the costumes, or the hairdos. Even if the details are less precise, the tradition of kabuki prints is adhered to even in these large-scale paintings, for example, in the concentration on the mie*, in the identification of the actor through his prominent family crests, or in other particular attributes.

Gallery 2

The second gallery is dedicated to portrait series.

The first important series displayed was produced by one of the great masters of this kind of imagery: Utagawa Kunisada II (1823-1880). The images are an unabashed celebration of actors, and demonstrate the establishment of cults around the stars of the time. Due to the popularity of kabuki theatre, the actors themselves gained a social importance that went far beyond the stage. For one thing, it enabled them to take part in the cultural activities of the various urban centres. They became members of poetry circles and groups of supporters were organised around them.

As today, many people started to identify themselves with their heroes and tried to participate as much as possible at their lives in real or virtual forms. The actors supported these wishes
through their presence and open lines of communication, partly also for financial reasons. The production of actors’ portraits reflects in part this appetite for images of the cultural heroes, with all the inherent connotations. The compositions of the prints vary, and represent the actor in a number of forms: on stage in one of his major roles, walking in a public landscape, in the midst in a battle, or taking part in a supernatural story. All variants were depicted on either a single sheet or on multiple sheets, such as diptychs or triptychs. However, when depicted in a play, the main subject of the play is always shown in one of the kabuki’s most important moments, that is, cutting a mie pose.

Another large series of actor prints is also shown in this gallery: the prints are linked to the scenic adaption of the Nansō Satomi Hakkenden (or, Tale of the Eight Dogs) by Kyokutei Bakin (1767-1848). One of the great literary figures of the 19th century, Bakin published the story in 106 instalments between 1814 and 1842. The novel is situated in Japan during the civil wars of the 15th and 16th centuries and tells the stories of eight half-brothers, all of them descendants from a dog. Their adventures are partly based on the famous Chinese novel, The Water Margin, and evoke important subjects, such as loyalty, family honour, and moral behaviour according to Buddhist teachings. The thirty-five prints on display give an overview over the wide variety of personalities in the texts and help to clarify the immense popularity of the actors.

**Gallery 3**

The third gallery displays the great variety in actor print types. The objects shown help to clarify differences between prints produced in Edo and those produced in Osaka, and, in addition, highlight a few unconventional actor print traditions.

The majority of all workshops for Japanese woodblock prints were established during the Edo period. The two most important centres are Edo, the political capital, and the region of Osaka and Kyoto. The images from Edo are called edo-e*, while the others are called kamigata-e*. Furthermore, a more limited production took place in Nagasaki and in important religious centres.

Most producers of woodblock prints were based in Edo. At its highpoint, over one hundred Edo publishers and workshops created prints in a wide range of genres, including prints of actors, beautiful women, landscapes, erotic encounters, birds and flowers, warriors, demons, surimono*, as well as a prodigious production of illustrated books.

However, Osaka was more concentrated on prints depicting kabuki actors. Here, the production was more restrained, and the style of the images was different, reflecting local styles in acting. While in Edo the extreme and harsh aragoto* style was appreciated, Osaka favoured a more realistic and discrete wagoto* style. As a result, the kamigata-e depictions are strikingly different from those of the edo-e. In Osaka, the focus was on the finesse of the gestures and on the delicacy of facial expressions. Interestingly, the collection of the Cabinet d’arts graphiques contains an unusually large number of Osaka-prints, either as actor prints, fans, shadow-prints or surimono.

**Fan prints (uchiwa-e*)** were very popular during early modern Japan. By the mid-Edo period, the promotion of actors through the publishers caused fan prints featuring images of famous actors to become important fashion accessories, particularly during the summer. Their production was typically limited to spring and summer and the images most often represented kabuki actors or well-known courtesans. The images, whether round or oval, had to be cut out and pasted onto a bamboo-frame, which was different from the previous technique of creating fan images, in which images were usually brushed directly onto the framed paper. Due to their functional nature, fans were typically destroyed after a season of use and only uncut prints have survived. The collection of the Cabinet conserves an exceptional high number of these prints in a large variety of subjects. During the 1820s, the form of the fans changed from round to a more elliptical shape. Important artists from the Utagawa school, such as Kunisada (1786-1865) and Kuniyoshi (1797-1861) created fan patterns in Edo, and Shunkōsai Hokushū
(active ca. 1802-1832) created them in Osaka. These artists developed strong visual compositions and established local trademarks.

Racket prints (hagoita-e) were used to decorate wooden paddles used for the ritual game played at New Year called hanetsuki. This game was developed at the beginning of the Edo Period. Its basic principle is similar to our modern badminton, i.e., two players try to keep a shuttlecock as long as possible in the air. The back of the racket, unused for the game, was often decorated by prints, typically limited to a typical bold outline, which served to form the motif. As with the fan-prints, Kabuki actors were a common subject, as well as other personalities from the pleasure quarters in Edo. These prints have a precise function and were often heavily damaged by their active use. Furthermore, availability was limited by a production that focused on a single season. Therefore it is no surprise that most of the racket prints known today are uncut examples, such as the four prints presently on show.

Shadow-prints (kage-e) are a striking type of Japanese prints. They exist in various forms: as entertaining, humorous images, and as actor prints. The prints evoke visual illusions: we sense the presence of an actor behind a screen at a private moment, far away from the glamour of the stage. The emphasis on depicting the face, shown very large, reinforces the intimate aspect, which was often underlined by a poem supposedly written by the actor. This kind of portrait enabled proximity between the amateurs and their favourite actors and produced the illusion that the owners actively participated in the life of the actors.

Posthumous portraits (shini-e) occupy a singular place in Japanese culture. They are also known as “images of death”. Although also commemorative portraits exist for musicians and visual artists, most of the shini-e are dedicated to kabuki actors. Usually they represent the deceased in a light blue garment, and indicate the date of death, the age at death, and the posthumous Buddhist name, as well as the place of his grave. A good number of these prints were designed by lesser-known artists, since the speed of publication became an important issue. It is therefore no surprise that the suicide of the popular Ichikawa Danjūrō VIII (1823-1854) was followed by a large number of such portraits. Danjūrō VIII was introduced to the stage at the very young age of one month, and, as many other actors, he pursued his career in the family tradition. At the age of nine, he received from his father the title of Ichikawa Danjūrō VIII, an event that was also celebrated in an elaborated surimono (see Inv. E.2013-0156). Initially playing minor roles, he was increasingly successful after 1840, specializing in playing young lovers. He committed suicide under tragic circumstances, a fact that not only reverberated with his many dedicated fans, but also became a key reason for the many posthumous prints.

With four examples of surimono this gallery presents another type of ukiyo-e, that, while on the margins, were, nonetheless, very important for the understanding of kabuki culture. Between 1790 and 1830 this kind of print sees its highest level of appreciation. Although a generic term (lit. “printed things”) describes these prints; they are specific in nature and were created in response to private commissions related to particular events. The format comes in different sizes, but they were always printed in low numbers and given only to a highly educated public. The treatment of the surface and the iconography is usually more experimental and sophisticated than commercial prints, likewise, the striking printing techniques.

It is only when we consider the relation of text and image, that the complexity of these images can be understood. In most cases, the texts are poems. Sometimes kabuki actors commissioned surimono in order to document an important event, or to conserve a memory, while at the same time underlining the importance of the patron. These exceptional prints, even more rare than Osaka prints, were found in large numbers in the collection of the Cabinet d’arts graphiques and will become the subject of a future exhibition.