

Courtiers, Courtesans, and Cronos

Women in Japanese Prints

Japan during the Edo or Tokugawa period (1603–1868) was a man’s world. Men dominated politics, commerce, philosophy, and religion, as well as cultural production and the arts. Society was strictly stratified through two frameworks: one based on social position and the other based on gender. From low to high, social classes were rural peasants (*heimin* and *nōmin*), urban merchants and artisans (*chōnin*), a special warrior class (*samurai*), land-owning lords (*daimyō*), and finally the shogun and the emperor. Within each of these ranks, women were deemed inferior to men.

These rigid hierarchies did not mean that Tokugawa women lacked abilities or were illiterate; quite the contrary, women had diverse roles in society and contributed significantly to the creation and dissemination of culture. Our limited understanding of the lives of early modern Japanese women lies rather in the fact that fewer historical records of women’s activities and ideas have come down to us. Women with verifiable stories are so rare that historians have written about “discovering” and “rediscovering” these women. In order to explore this subject, scholars have had to interpret various resources, such as marriage and divorce records, letters, diaries, legal documents, literature, poetry, and visual arts.

This exhibition considers depictions of women in color woodblock prints and book illustrations from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These works demonstrate how only a few conventionalized identities for women – usually erudite, refined, and beautiful young women – were chosen for representation by the all-male artists, carvers, printers, and publishers producing and distributing woodblock prints. These images often portray confining identities and roles for Edo women, but also reveal some aspects about women’s lives that are otherwise rarely recorded.

This exhibition continues the Museum’s series exploring printmaking from Edo Japan. Some of the earliest Japanese prints from the collection are shown here, along with several others that have never been on display before.

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U.No. 68.37

Torii Kiyomasu II (1706–1763) or
Torii Kiyonobu II (active ca. 1725–1760)
*The Actor Takinaka Hidematsu I Posing as a Teahouse
Waitress Like a Budding Flower*, 1720s–1740s
Woodblock print with hand-coloring and brass dust
Publisher: Iseya Kimbei

Gift of Mr. Alvin John Accola in memory of his wife Katharine Mize Accola (68.37)

Takinaka Hidematsu I was a famous *onnagata*, a man who specialized in women's roles in kabuki theater. A "teahouse waitress" is a vernacular term for a prostitute, as brothels were commonly called teahouses. *Onnagata* were essential to the kabuki repertoire, because women had been prohibited from acting since 1629. The exclusivity of kabuki for male actors is ironic given that the origins of this style of narrative musical theater are traced to a woman named Izumo no Okuni. In 1603, she began performing in men's costumes in Kyoto. She and an enterprising group of women held regular performances in Kyoto's brothel district, known as Shimabara, garnering considerable popular attention. Their plays reflecting contemporary life became a sensation across Japan, and they were invited to perform in Edo (Tokyo), even at the court of the shogun. A culture of hedonism and immorality came to be associated with kabuki, however, and in 1629 the shogun banned women from performing. This ban remained in effect for the entire Tokugawa period and is still traditional in modern staging of kabuki plays.



Utagawa Kuniyoshi (Ichiyusai, 1797–1861)

Ise Song and Dance (Ise Ondo), 1854

Color woodblock print

Publisher: Mitaya Kihachi and Yamaguchiya Tobei

Gift of Mr. Alvin John Accola in memory of his wife Katharine Mize Accola (68.28 a, b, & c)

Nine young women dance across this triptych as they perform *Ise Ondo*, a folk song and dance that originated in the brothels of Ise in Mie prefecture. Ise is home to some of the oldest and most revered Shinto shrines in Japan and has been a major pilgrimage site for centuries. Restaurants and inns catered to pilgrims, and the pleasure district, called Furuichi, became a destination in its own right. After nine prostitutes were murdered there in 1796, *Ise Ondo* took on a new meaning, memorializing these women. This folk performance also became known throughout Japan, not only through transmission by pilgrims and travelers, but also because popular kabuki plays dramatized the mass murder. By the late Tokugawa period, when this print was made, it was socially acceptable for women to accompany their male relatives to watch performances of *Ise Ondo* in Furuichi.

Utagawa Kunisada (Toyokuni III, 1786–1864)
Page from an Illustrated Book (Kusazōshi), 1853
Woodblock text and illustration

Gift of Ruth E. Witt in memory of Arthur Witt, Jr. (2011.277)

Although women were frequently the subjects of prints, they were also print consumers. Tokugawa women of elite, merchant, and warrior classes were literate, as were many geishas and courtesans, because written correspondence was considered essential to proper etiquette and women participated in family businesses. Women also were primarily responsible for their children's education. By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, publishing for a variety of genres flourished in Japan. In daily life, women would have encountered images such as this page from a *kusazōshi*, an illustrated book of fiction.

Script at the top and bottom margins of this page frames a central image of two women. The elderly woman stoops as she approaches a doorway, while her younger companion stands behind her holding a box. *Kusazōshi* were the combined effort of an author who wrote the narrative and an artist who designed the illustration. A blockcutter carved the text and image on the same woodblock, which could be reprinted frequently, even hundreds of times. The faded quality of this impression indicates that it is from later in the edition, as the woodblock shows significant signs of wear; the block had begun to deteriorate from repeated pressure of the printing process. The hole in the lower left corner is likely from an insect or worm eating the paper.





Utagawa Kunitaru (1830?-1874)
Inside Fukagawa Hachiman Shrine
(*Fukagawa Hachimangu Keidai*)
From the series *Famous Views of Edo*
(*Edo Meisho No Uchi*), 1853
Color woodblock print

Gilbreath-McLorn Museum Fund (2017.11)

In Fukagawa, an eastern ward of the city of Edo (Tokyo), a shrine to the deity Hachiman was founded in 1627. Hachiman is a syncretic Shinto-Buddhist divinity with myriad associations and wide-ranging powers; he is revered as a warrior as well as a protector and preserver of life. For example, samurai warriors invoked the name of Hachiman during the Genpei War (1180-1185), yet mothers brought their infants to his shrine to pray for protection against disease.

This print offers not only a view of the large shrine complex at Fukagawa in 1853, but also a glimpse of routine activities there. Women and men amble around the *sandō*, the courtyard and processional way leading to the stairway to the *haiden*, the public worship hall. Near the stairs, a woman looks after a small child. At the left of the composition, a woman serves patrons at a café. Beneath a small structure next to the café, a devotee washes his or her hands in a fountain, ritual cleansing as a metaphor for purifying the soul before entering the sacred space of the shrine.



U. No. 68.38

Torii Kiyonaga (1752–1815)
The Clove: A Courtesan of the House of the Clove (Chōjiya)
From the series *Ten Magical Treasures of the Floating World (Ukiyo Jisshu Hō)*, 1785

Woodblock print with hand-coloring

Gift of Mr. Alvin John Accola in memory of his wife Katharine Mize Accola (68.38)

This print depicts an elite courtesan from Yoshiwara, the licensed pleasure district of the city of Edo (Tokyo). She receives patrons, who bow before her in accordance with proper etiquette when greeting a high-ranking prostitute. Yoshiwara is also referred to as the *ukiyo*, literally “the floating world,” alluding to the salacious and countercultural activities that took place there, including the sex trade and kabuki theater. Urban pleasure quarters were a significant source of inspiration for artists during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, so much so that Japanese prints in general, regardless of their subject-matter, are often called *ukiyo-e*, “images of the floating world.”

The grace and distinction of so many courtesans portrayed in *ukiyo-e* conceal a harsh reality. Among the hundreds of Yoshiwara prostitutes at any given time, very few attained elite status or could afford to escape the profession, but rather remained indentured servants their entire lives. During the period represented in this exhibition, the average age of death among sex workers is estimated to have been around twenty-one years old, and the most common cause of death was syphilis.



Kitigawa Utamaro I (1753–1806)

Kabuki Song: Fans of the Pleasure Quarters

(*Nagauta: Kuruwa No Suehiro*)

From the series *Entertainments of the Niwaka Festival in Yoshiwara (Seirō Niwaka Zensei Asobi)*, ca. 1801

Color woodblock print

Publisher: Moriya Jihei

Gift of Mr. Alvin John Accola in memory of his wife Katharine Mize Accola (68.33)

The Niwaka Festival was celebrated annually in the eighth lunar month (usually in September) in Yoshiwara in Edo (Tokyo). Including a parade replete with elaborate floats and colorfully costumed performers, the thrilling displays of this festival gave Yoshiwara businesses exceptional opportunities for promoting themselves to Edo patrons.

This rare print by Utamaro from a series about the Niwaka Festival depicts two geishas dressed as male and female entertainers performing a song from the kabuki repertoire. Only during this festival was an exception made to the prohibition of women acting in kabuki roles. Such performances inverted the gendered identities of kabuki. The geisha dressed as a woman in this print represents a woman performing as an *onnagata*, a male actor in a female role – in other words, a woman dressed as a man dressed as a woman.



Kitigawa Utamaro I (1753–1806)

Playing Music

From the series *Fashionable Brocade Pictures of Various Arts*
(*Fūryū Shogei No Nishiki*), ca. 1801

Color woodblock print

Publisher: Nishimuraya Yohachi

Gift of Mr. Alvin John Accola in memory of his wife Katharine Mize Accola (68.42)

This very rare – possibly unique – impression depicts the predominant subject of Utamaro’s designs: elegant and accomplished women. This print series celebrates artistic achievement; other images from the series feature flower arrangement (Boston, Museum of Fine Arts) and dance (Brussels, Museums of the Far East). Some Japanese women, particularly geishas, who were entertainers in urban pleasure quarters, did cultivate skills in music, dance, poetry, and calligraphy in order to become compelling entertainers and companions for men who patronized brothels, restaurants, and theaters. Although prints reflect some elements of historical truth, they represent mainly men’s fantasies of Yoshiwara women, most of whom were not well educated and were only available on the sex market. Utamaro’s formulaic depictions of idealized women were intended for the admiring male gaze, his prints commodities presenting commodities.



Katsukawa Shunkō II (Shunsen, 1762–ca. 1830)
Present-Day Occupations of Women in the Twelve Months
(*Josei Bijin Junika Getsu*), ca. 1810

Color woodblock print

Publisher: Yamaguchiya Tōbei

Gift of Mr. Alvin John Accola in memory of his wife Katharine Mize Accola (68.36)

One of the most popular types of *ukiyo-e* was *bijin-ga*, or pictures of beauties, which were often produced in series. These prints represent idealizations of women, even when they are engaged in mundane activities of daily life or frivolities as in this print. The two elite women depicted here wear elaborately coiffed hair and ornate kimonos in the latest fashion. One figure squats down amusing herself with a bouncing ball, while the other gracefully leans over to watch. The women are simultaneously engaged in play and on display for men's enjoyment.



Andō Hiroshige (Utagawa Hiroshige I, 1797–1858)

Woman Standing before Hydrangeas, ca. 1850

Color woodblock print

Gift of Mr. Alvin John Accola in memory of his wife Katharine Mize Accola (68.30)

Following earlier *ukiyo-e* artists like Utamaro, Andō Hiroshige and his contemporaries designed numerous series of *bijin-ga*, images of beautiful women, to meet continuing demand. In this example, Hiroshige demonstrates the fashionability of a courtesan by emphasizing the color blue, using multiple hues to represent decorative fabrics, hydrangeas (a plant native to Japan), and the ground and sky.

The mode of using only blue in varying shades in Japanese designs is called *aizuri*, from the Western word azure; *semi-aizuri* is used to refer to images like this that are predominantly blue but have other secondary colors. Blue's complement, orange, provides accents throughout this design.

Beginning in the 1830s, the imported pigment Prussian blue or Berlin blue, *bero* in Japanese, sparked what has been called the "blue revolution" in *ukiyo-e*. Previously, blue pigments from native dayflowers or imported indigo dyes were used in printmaking, but these fade or change quickly. Prussian blue is more stable, even with exposure to light and humidity. In earlier studies of Japanese prints, scholars mistakenly assumed this vivid blue pigment was a traditional Japanese formulation derived from indigo, even calling it "Hiroshige blue." Now we understand that the blue for which Hiroshige is famous was a uniquely Japanese appropriation of a European material.