

Kabuki Performance and Expression in Japanese Prints

Although today kabuki is often synonymous with traditional or classical Japanese theater — much like Shakespeare is to English theater — it was not always so. Like Shakespeare's works, kabuki plays were avant-garde, popular, and sometimes subversive performances that criticized social customs and threatened systems of authority. Even the modern writing of the word *kabuki* (歌舞伎) has been changed to have a more elevated and dignified meaning. The three characters of the written word used to be “song,” “dance,” and “prostitute,” but the last character has been replaced with “skill” since the Meiji period (1868–1912), to denote the craft of acting and reduce any immoral connotation.

The term *kabuki* comes from *kabuku*, meaning “to incline” or “to tilt,” and it was used figuratively to refer to individuals or activities that were counterculture. Such notions relate to kabuki's origins, which can be traced to 1603, when a woman named Izumo no Okuni performed in men's clothing in Kyoto and, later, in Edo (modern-day Tokyo). A culture of hedonism and immorality came to be associated with an enterprising group of women acting out narrative scenes with musical accompaniment on a stage they built in the brothel district of Kyoto. Japan's military government, the Tokugawa shogunate, cracked down in 1629 by barring women entirely from acting.

Kabuki in the nineteenth century, the period represented in this exhibition, needs to be understood against this historical backdrop. Due to the sustained prohibition of women from performing, only men were actors; a specialist in female roles was known as an *onnagata* (“woman type”). In addition, Kabuki retained its disreputable edginess. Plots often featured illicit love affairs, courtesans and their patrons, as well as crimes of passion, and theaters were usually located in the so-called “pleasure district” or *ukiyo* (literally “floating world”) of a city. These associations only fueled interest in kabuki. All levels of society flocked to plays and closely followed theaters' repertoires and actors' careers. Occasionally, the fame of a particular narrative sparked cultural trends, inspiring clothing, hairstyles, and even behaviors. The shogunate frequently issued regulations aimed at limiting attendance and curtailing extravagances of costumes and sets. Some fads inspired by plays — such as couples' suicides or youths running away — so alarmed officials that they banned performances altogether.

Artists, like Utagawa Kunisada (1786–1864), whose prints dominate this exhibition, capitalized on the immense popularity of the theater. He portrayed climactic scenes from favorite plays and portraits of famous actors, usually in character. Like kabuki performances, prints representing plays and characters were targets of governmental scrutiny and censorship. Each print shown here features a censor's stamp, which indicated official approval for publication. These prints became an essential part of the consumer culture of kabuki, much like today's magazines and posters featuring performing artists. The survival of such prints, therefore, is remarkable, since they were literally used up by eager theater-going audiences in Japan.



Utagawa Kunisada (Toyokuni III, 1786–1864)
Scene from the Kabuki Play, Sekitori Sen Ryô Nobori
(The Rise of the 1000 Ryô Wrestler), 1859
Color woodblock print
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Henry Hamilton (65.340 a, b, & c)

The protagonists of this play are two *sumo* wrestlers, Iwagawa (center) and Tetsugadake (right). Both men must raise large amounts of money for their wealthy patrons, who wish to solicit the same courtesan. In this scene, Tetsugadake offers to help Iwagawa if he will throw the match. Iwagawa's wife, Otowa, overhears the conversation from the doorway at the left. For knowing viewers, this moment is pivotal to the plot, as Otowa will later sell herself into prostitution to raise the needed funds and prevent her husband's professional shame.



Utagawa Kunisada (Toyokuni III, 1786–1864)

Actors in a Kabuki Play with Musicians

in the Tokiwazu Renjû, 1860

Color woodblock print

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Henry Hamilton (65.360 a & b)

Music and dance are essential components of kabuki, in addition to acting. *Jôruri* is narrative music with chant accompanied by *shamisen*, a three-stringed instrument. *Tokiwazu* is one of the many styles of *jôruri* that developed during the eighteenth century, after another musical form had been banned by the shogunate. This pair of prints depicts a *tokiwazu renjû*, a group of musicians including two *shamisen* players and three vocalists, performing behind the actors.



Utagawa Kunisada (Toyokuni III, 1786–1864)

Scene from the Kabuki Play, Kanjinchô
(The Subscription List), 1859

Color woodblock print

Publisher: Kiya Sôjirô

Blockcutter: Koizumi Kanegorô (Hori Kane)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Henry Hamilton (65.341 a, b, & c)

Kabuki is characterized by highly stylized performance. Each actor in this scene strikes a distinctive pose, called a *mie* (pronounced “mee-eh”), a technique essential to kabuki method. The sustaining of a *mie* signals to audiences that a particularly important plot development or dramatically intense moment is occurring. Together the different positions of these three actors is known as the pose *tenchijin no mie*, representing earth, humanity, and heaven.



Utagawa Kunisada (Toyokuni III, 1786–1864)
Scene from the Kabuki Play, Meiboku Sendai Hagi
(**The Disputed Succession**), 1861

Color woodblock print

Publisher: Sagamiya Tokichi (Ai-To)

Blockcutter: Sugawa Sennosuke (Hori Sennosuke)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Henry Hamilton (65.347 a, b, & c)

Meiboku Sendai Hagi is one of the most famous and frequently staged plays in the entire kabuki repertoire. For this print, Kunisada chose a scene with special effects that delighted audiences. The rat at center is actually a metamorphosed character, the evil magician Nikki Danjō, who appears in his human form at the left. Using a *sappon* (trap door) in the stage floor, Nikki arises in a cloud of smoke, wearing a long grey *kamishimo* (formal attire of samurai) to indicate that he has transformed from the rat. Prints of this scene must have been in high demand, because Kunisada issued several different versions of it.



Utagawa Kunisada (Toyokuni III, 1786–1864)
Scene from the Kabuki Play, Koi Nyôbô Somewake
Tazuna (The Colored Reins of a Loving Wife), 1861

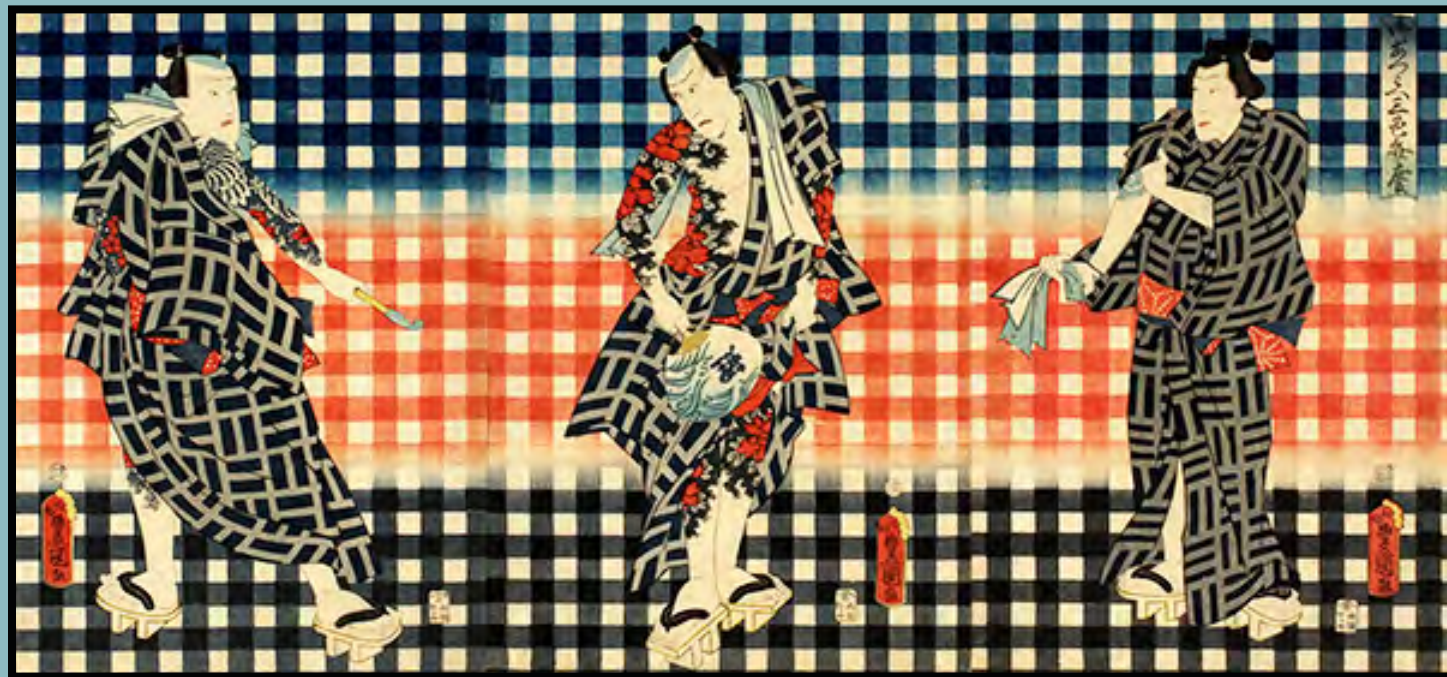
Color woodblock print

Publisher: Izutsuya Shokichi

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Henry Hamilton (65.345 a, b, & c)

Performers and entertainers were of a lower class in Japanese society and were not permitted to have surnames; therefore, it was customary for a kabuki actor to assume a stage name or *yagô* (literally “shop name”). This scene features the three famous actors of the mid-nineteenth century: Ichikawa Danjûrô IX (left), Nakamura Shikan IV (center), and Onoe Kikugorô V (right). Their names are not hereditary but based on their dramatic lineage, in other words, with which “shop” of actors they are affiliated. Many actors changed their names several times throughout their careers to indicate their associations.

In this innovative design, the artist cropped the scene close, emphasizing the dynamic action of a brawl. The massive statue of the seated figure in the background is truncated, showing only the torso. At the bottom center margin are the upturned legs of a person who is tumbling down.



Utagawa Kunisada (Toyokuni III, 1786–1864)

Characters from a Kabuki Play, 1858–1861

Color woodblock print

Publisher: Kagiya Shôbei (Kagishô)

Blockcutter: Koizumi Kanegorô (Hori Kane)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Henry Hamilton (65.354 a, b, & c)

An immensely prolific artist, Kunisada designed thousands of color woodblock prints over the course of his sixty-year career. The vast majority of these prints depict kabuki subjects. In order to streamline the production of prints, images were designed and issued in standard sizes. The most common size was the *ôban*, which measured about 15 x 10 inches. Larger designs were cut on two or three blocks, and the prints arranged together in a diptych (two panels) or triptych (three panels). This triptych portraying actors with a checkered background appears to be quite rare, as comparable examples have so far not been found in major collections of Japanese prints around the world.



Utagawa Kunisada (Toyokuni III, 1786–1864)
*Actors in the Kabuki Play, Hachiman Matsuri
Yomiya no Nigiwai (The Moonlight Night
Bustle at the Hachiman Festival)*, 1860

Color woodblock print

Publisher: Jōshūya Kinzō

Blockcutter: Sugawa Sennosuke (Hori Sennosuke)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Henry Hamilton (65.371)

Many kabuki plays were already classics by the nineteenth century, having been performed for centuries or adapted from traditional narratives. In the mid-nineteenth century an appreciation developed for *kizewamono*, “raw domestic plays,” that depicted life among the urban lower classes. *Hachiman Matsuri Yomiya no Nigiwai*, first staged in 1860, was based on two events in fairly recent history in Fukagawa, the “pleasure district” of Edo. One is the collapse of the massive Eitai Bridge in 1807 during the annual Hachiman Festival, when as many as 1,500 people drowned. The other is the 1820 murder-suicide involving a geisha named Omino and the disinherited son of a merchant.



Utagawa Kunisada (Toyokuni III, 1786–1864)
*Actor Ichikawa Monosuke V as Kokonoe of the
Miuraya, from the series Imayo Oshi-e Kagami
(Mirrors for Collage Pictures in the Modern Style), 1860*
Color woodblock print
Publisher: Yokokawa Takejiro (Hori Take)
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Henry Hamilton (65.369.10)

All actors in kabuki plays were men, as women had been prohibited from performing in Japan since 1629. An actor in a female role is known as an *onnagata* (literally “woman type”). Most portrayals of women in kabuki are stereotypes of different kinds of women, such as alluring courtesans, dutiful wives, elderly matrons, and malicious witches. Many actors worked exclusively as *onnagata* and became renowned for their specialization. Ichikawa Monosuke V was known for his performances as old women. The age and dignity of this character is emphasized by the profusion of decorations in her hair: the higher a woman’s rank the more hairpins she could wear.



Utagawa Kunisada (Toyokuni III, 1786–1864)
Scene from the Kabuki Play, Date Musume Koi
No Higanoko (The Firey Love of a Greengrocer's Daughter), 1858–1861

Color woodblock print

Publisher: Yokokawa Takejiro (Hori Take)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Henry Hamilton (65.352 B & C)

Several versions of the tale of the Greengrocer's Daughter, the young woman Oshichi, have been staged. These plays are based on historical events. In 1682, when a fire destroyed the home of Oshichi and her family, they took refuge at a temple. She fell in love with a temple servant, a forbidden romance between youths of different social classes. When her family moved into their rebuilt home, Oshichi attempted to start a fire to force them to return to the temple. She was caught in the act and later burned at the stake for committing arson. The title of the adaptation depicted in this set of prints makes a play-on-words involving the fires that are essential to the plot, Oshichi's "burning" love for the servant, and the method of her execution.