

Contextual Information and Edo Feminine Ideals

Ukiyo-e (pictures of the floating world) is a significant genre in the Japanese woodblock print tradition as it highlights the fleeting cultural ideals of the Edo period. Ukiyo-e images often featured motifs that glorified courtesan or geisha life, part of the inclination toward portraying idealized feminine beauty. Japan in the Edo period was a man's world and fueled the production of such art. Artists capitalized on this entertaining subject matter and the popularity of Ukiyo-e prints fueled successful commercialism. Geishas within the pleasure world were often celebrities and fashion trendsetters in society, and printmakers aimed to embellish and glorify the luxuries of geisha life to celebrate the cultural aspect they provided to the Japanese Edo experience. Stereotyped ideals of standards of beauty were common in Ukiyo-e imagery like C. Ohira's print, featuring real or imagined portraits of geishas. Printmakers called this type of imagery motif *binjin*, which is translated in English to "beautiful women." Evident in *binjin* imagery are the cultural beauty necessities that included wearing elaborate kimonos, specific hair styling and ornamentation, face whitening, and blackening of the teeth.

Media and Process Description

C. Ohira's *Geisha Print Series* are derived from the same woodblock design. The prints are in ascending order from the first print being the most basic and having the least compositional elements to the last piece being the most complete. The media process of woodblock printing, though originated in China, is a very significant and traditional medium in the culture of Japanese art production. The production process of these prints is complex: a linear illustration is produced and then skillfully carved into a primary woodblock, to which black ink is applied before the woodblock is pressed onto paper, and the inks are thus transferred. Once a design is carved into a block, the block can be used again and again. The process of coloring a woodblock print is laborious, as the artist needs to carve a separate block for each desired color, apply inks, then carefully layer each color stage onto the original line print.

Vocabulary

Edo Period (1615–1868): a peaceful and economically prosperous era in the history of feudal Japan.

Geisha, courtesan: in Japanese culture, often famed and glorified, trained female entertainers, costumed to beauty ideals, and skilled in various traditional arts.

Ukiyo-e: a genre of Japanese woodblock prints and paintings originating in the Edo Period, featuring motifs that allude to history, cultural narratives, poetic references, popular theatre, and the pleasure quarters.

Binjin: a sub-genre of Ukiyo-e imagery that featured real or imagined portraits of women who embodied Edo's standards for idealized and courtesan feminine beauty. Translates in English to "beautiful women."

Title: *Geisha Print Series*

Artist: C. Ohira

Date: nd—probably 19th Century

Size: 10 x 12 inches, in fan shape

Medium: Ukiyo-e woodblock print

Acquisition #: 94.1.16

Additional Works by Artist in collection?
YES



References

www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/plea/hd_plea.htm
<http://mercury.lcs.mit.edu/~jnc/prints/process.html>
<http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/k/kimono-decoration-symbols-motifs/>
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3795440>
Sadao, Kikuchi. *A Treasury of Japanese Woodblock Prints Ukiyo-e*. Translated by Don Kenny (1969). New York: Crown Publishers. 1963. 29-54.
Thompson, Sarah. "The World of Japanese Prints." *Philadelphia Museum of Art Bulletin*, Vol. 82, No. 349/350, pp. 1+3-47. Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1986.

Utawaga Kuniyoshi (1797-1861), *Kaga no Chiyo (From the Lives of Women)*, c. 1844, color woodblock print, in the shape of a fan.



The Issue of Minimal Scholarship

The artist C. Ohira, and his set of prints, have seemingly stimulated no prior existing educative scholarship, which is an issue for the MoFA. Like many other museums that have acquired barely identifiable objects, the MoFA must determine the educative, cultural, or monetary value of the work. A symbolic analysis of formal and compositional elements, as well as the inferences from the historical and cultural context surrounding Ukiyo-e prints and the Edo Period, make it possible to combat the issue of no prior scholarship. Through formal analysis, the analysis of the symbolic intent of compositional devices, and through an understanding of the symbolic nature of many elements of traditional geisha costume and hair fashions, we can establish suggested roles for the three figures, as well as preserve information about cultural, art and media practices of the Edo Period in Japan's history. The work, a complete set of prints, gives insight to the media process and understanding of the stages of woodblock printing and coloring. Also, by comparing this specific work to similar works with more accrued scholarship, we can gain insight. One strong comparative example is Utawaga Kuniyoshi's *Kaga no Chiyo (From the Lives of Women)*, which, like C. Ohira's print, is also a color woodcut fan print, with the *binjin* motif. Kuniyoshi's fan print, like other colored fan prints featuring *binjin* imagery, referenced classical haiku poetry. Therefore we can suggest the possibility of a thematic reference to a poetic or literary narrative in C. Ohira's print.

Completed Fall 2011 by Natalie Weinberg