

# Stories of the Edo rich and famous

*The prosperous Edo period of Japanese history was characterised by a stable government, a strong sense of social order and a burgeoning urbanised population enjoying a lifestyle of pleasure known as the 'floating world'. The visual record of this period – ukiyo-e – shows a world of urban fashion and hedonistic pleasures enjoyed by the newly affluent developing middle classes.*

From the 1760s to the 1880s the streets and lives of one of the world's most populous cities at the time – Edo – were brought to life with exquisitely coloured and designed images produced from intricately carved and printed woodblocks... recording the daily life, passions, fashions and pleasures of a complex and culturally rich society.<sup>i</sup>



The woodblock prints that became so popular were originally an offshoot of the book publishing industry. During the seventeenth century, publishers in the major cities mass-produced both economical printed editions of classical literature and new stories of life in the fashionable modern world, all profusely illustrated. Around 1680, Edo publishers began to make single-sheet pictorial prints as well, enabling ordinary people who were not members of the elite to have professionally created art in their homes.

The works of early *ukiyo-e* artists were initially published as simple black and white prints, but as competition between publishers increased a style of hand-coloured print was produced using brushwork of decorative red and/or yellow onto sections of the printed image. In the early eighteenth century the technique of *beni-e* was developed, using the traditional black printed image with hand-brushed sections of red, orange and other pigments, including green or yellow. The so-called 'Golden Age' of *ukiyo-e* from 1781 to 1801 (encompassing the Tenmei and Kansei periods) covers the development of multicoloured woodblock prints known as *nishiki-e*.

The introduction of *nishiki-e* – pioneered by artist Suzuki Harunobu in 1765 – meant up to 20 different woodblocks could be used to create a single image, with each colour requiring its own woodblock. The result was a highly detailed and extremely colourful artwork that often included special techniques such as glittering mica backgrounds, metallic pigments and the overprinting of colours to create translucent effects. Pictorially, Harunobu also established a different level of sophistication; the new polychrome prints were printed on high quality paper using fine pigments, often with images depicting women in moments reminiscent of classical Japanese poetry. Subjects portrayed in *ukiyo-e* included famous actors, beautiful women, sporting stars, food and travel scenes as well as fashion illustration, picture calendars, greeting cards, illustrated books, travel and entertainment guides. It was also used as promotional material for the

**Left:** Torii Kiyonaga, 1752-1815

The Third Month, from the series Twelve Months in the South (*Minami jūni kō*)  
Vertical *ōban*, *nishiki-e*. 38.6 x 25.8cm, about 1784  
Signature: Kiyonaga ga (on each sheet). William Sturgis Bigelow Collection, 11.1395. Image 2013 © Museum Fine Arts, Boston

**Right:** Kitagawa Utamaro, ?-1806

Hinazuru and Hinamatsu of the Chōjiya, from the series Courtesans of the Pleasure Quarters in Double Mirrors (*Seirō yūkun awase kagami*)  
Vertical *ōban*, *nishiki-e*. 36.4 x 25.1cm, about 1797  
Signature: Utamaro hitsu. Publisher: Yamadaya Sanshirō  
William Sturgis Bigelow Collection, 11.14297.  
Image 2013 © Museum Fine Arts, Boston



## Stories of the Edo rich and famous cont.

*Kabuki* theatres, teahouses and restaurants.

Each *ukiyo-e* print required the skill of four different tradesmen: the artist/designer, the carver/engraver, the printer and the publisher. Small cuts to the edge of each woodblock acted as alignment guides for perfect colour registration, with the publisher deciding on the subject and the complexity of the production – the prints would be sold in his bookstore or through street vendors. The artist provided the line drawing for the artwork, which was then transferred onto a translucent paper that was pasted down onto the cherrywood block. The engraver carefully chiselled the wood away to make the drawing in reverse. Ink was applied to the surface of the woodblock, the paper laid over it and the print made by rubbing a round pad over the back of the paper. Up to 10,000 copies could be printed from each block before it wore out. The world of the *ukiyo-e* artists was commercial and their works were produced en masse for mainstream consumption, at a time when being in the mainstream was a sophisticated pleasure to be sought after and revelled in.

Three *ukiyo-e* artists - Torii Kiyonaga, Kitagawa Utamaro and Tōshūsai Sharaku - were considered to be master print makers and key innovators in the medium of *ukiyo-e* print. Their works were recently exhibited at the Shepparton Art Museum, as part of an exchange programme between Greater Shepparton and Toyoake in the Aichi Prefecture in Japan, with the works on loan from the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.



### Torii Kiyonaga (1752 - 1815)

Torii Kiyonaga is considered one of the great masters of the multi-colour print, producing images of courtesans and beautiful women.

Kiyonaga was a pupil of Torii Kiyomitsu and began his career with pictures of *Kabuki* actors, a genre for which the Torii School was well-known. At the height of his career Kiyonaga drew beautiful women for which he was particularly revered, and in 1787 became the head of the Torii School. He was an artist of unrivalled popularity during the Tenmei era of the 1780s and his images can be seen as creations of an age where society was universally blessed in leisure time after almost two centuries of peace.

Growing up in the heart of Edo as the son of a bookseller, Kiyonaga naturally developed an interest in the visual aesthetics of books and prints. Considered to be one of the most perfect masters of arranging composition on a flat surface, he created strong colour palettes and pioneered colour relationships that became standards for following artists.

Among all of Kiyonaga's unique innovations and skills, it is perhaps the grace and beauty of his standing female figures that leave the most lasting impression. His knowledge of anatomy and confidence of line create sensuous figures with a languid defiance that had never been seen before or matched since. His elongated figures are likely to have emerged from an obsession in the Edo period for a perfect, tall, graceful and very un-Japanese like figure. Kiyonaga's women captured the imagination of Edo's fashion-conscious society, being sexier and more provocative than their predecessors and were represented in idealistic situations of leisure and carefree luxury.

### Kitagawa Utamaro (1753 - 1806)

When Torii Kiyonaga succeeded to the position of head of the Torii School, Kitagawa Utamaro became the leading artist in the field of *Bijinga*.

Initially he worked under the name of Katagawa Toyoaki before taking the name Utamaro. He then went on to create masterpieces in *bijinga*, book illustrations and humorous poems. Utamaro devoted much of his life to representing beautiful women and the pursuit of beauty. In *The Golden Age of Colour Prints*, Wayne Crothers – curator of Asian Art at the National Gallery of Victoria – writes: 'Utamaro's ultimate achievement was to create emotionally imbued portraiture of beautiful women. He depicted the charm of their faces, the smoothness and purity of their skin and the suggestion of the sweet aroma of their bodies, as well as presenting their individual qualities as living people. The more we become enchanted by the grace and poise of Utamaro's women, the more we discover his ability to give each figure a unique personality of its own.' Utamaro

#### Left: Torii Kiyonaga, 1752-1815

Actor Segawa Kikunojō III Performing the Lion Dance (*Shakkyō*)  
Vertical *ōban*, *nishiki-e*. 37.2 x 24.9 cm, 1789, 3rd month  
Signature: Kiyonaga ga. Publisher: Nishimuraya Yohachi (Eijudō)  
William Sturgis Bigelow Collection, 11.13916  
Image 2013 © Museum Fine Arts, Boston

#### Opposite left: Kitagawa Utamaro, ?-1806

Courtesan and Komusō  
Vertical *ōban*, *nishiki-e*. 38.8 x 25.9 cm, about 1793  
Signature: Utamaro hitsu. Publisher: Tsutaya Jūzaburō (Kōshodō)  
William Sturgis Bigelow Collection, 11.21176  
Image 2013 © Museum Fine Arts, Boston

#### Opposite right: Tōshūsai Sharaku, active 1794-1795

Actor Ichikawa Omezō as the Manservant Ippei  
Vertical *ōban*, *nishiki-e*. 37.9 x 24.9 cm, 1794, 5th month  
Signature: Tōshūsai Sharaku ga  
Publisher: Tsutaya Jūzaburō (Kōshodō)  
William Sturgis Bigelow Collection, 11.14672  
Image 2013 © Museum Fine Arts, Boston



produced over 2000 prints during his lifetime, as well as paintings, illustrated books of animal, insect and nature studies and over 30 *shunga* (erotic books), and when his work reached Europe in the mid-1800s it influenced important European artists of the day, including Toulouse-Lautrec. His was a sad end, however. The ever-increasing demand for his works led to an inevitable decline in quality, and in 1804 he produced a print that depicted the great historical figure of Toyotomi Hideyoshi in a manner considered disrespectful by the authorities. Utamaro was imprisoned for three days and confined to his home in chains for a further fifty days. He never recovered from the humiliation and died two years later in relative obscurity.

#### Toshusai Sharaku (active 1794 - 1801)

Toshusai Sharaku is a mysterious figure in the history of Japanese art. He produced an astonishing body of work: 145 prints in a very brief working period from May 1794 to January 1795.

The true identity of the artist has never been established, although many theories exist about who he was and why his career was so short-lived. Virtually nothing is known about him – where he came from, where he was born, his real name and where and why he disappeared. It is, notes Wayne Crothers, very possible that Sharaku never actually existed at all and was the invention of the business-savvy publisher Tsutaya Juzaburo, who orchestrated his talented workshop artisans to create an eccentrically innovative collection of Kabuki actors' portraits that would start a new commercial sensation and stir up a bit of fun for the pleasure-seeking public.

Sharaku's prints are particularly striking because they

The ukiyo-e were cheap enough to be used as disposable decorations, rather like modern posters; and so although hundreds or even thousands of each design were originally made, only a small percentage have survived.<sup>ii</sup>

simultaneously reflect the actor as a real person and the stage character being performed. His portraits are thought to be more complex than those of other artists, as they reveal something of the psychological intensity of the actor at a particular point in the narrative of a play. Some of Sharaku's most celebrated works

are those of larger middle-aged male actors performing the roles of beautiful young women. In such works, we are witness to a feminised sensibility created with the undeniable physique of an older male.

Although the Golden Age of *ukiyo-e* came to a close with the end of the creative output of Kiyonaga, Utamaro and Sharaku, the prints continued to capture the imagination of the public right through to the closing days of the Edo period, when Japan opened its doors to foreign technologies. The woodblock print was replaced with the photograph and the *ukiyo-e* print disappeared, only to be rediscovered in all its artistic glory by a society inundated with technological advancements but searching for individual artistry.

i) Wayne Crothers, Curator Asian Art National Gallery of Victoria, Shepparton Art Museum, *The Golden Age of Colour Prints Catalogue 2013*, pp11

ii) Sarah E. Thompson, Assistant Curator for Japanese Prints Art of Asia, Oceania and Africa, Shepparton Art Museum, *The Golden Age of Colour Prints Catalogue 2013*, pp8

Reference: The information presented here is largely taken from the catalogue for *The Golden Age of Colour Prints*, produced for the 2013 exhibition of the same name by Shepparton Art Museum and written by Wayne Crothers and Sarah E. Thompson. Our thanks to Shepparton Art Museum for supplying editorial information and permission for all images.