Despite over three centuries of replication and circulation in the world, the Ukiyo-e woodblock print has retained its value as an object of both intrigue and artistic veneration. Perhaps owing to their relatively late appearance outside Japan, in line with its "closed-country" foreign policy of the time, the medium’s prints are often still figured as exotic ‘curios,’ recalling Parisian’s fervent *japonisme* at the turn of the century. Anthropologists Ronald and Catherine Berndt recognised, however, the degree to which Ukiyo-e was embedded in the culture from which it arose, and placed particular significance on its connection to Edo (modern-day Tokyo). Their exceptional collection of Ukiyo-e was exhibited at the Berndt Museum in 2014, along with an aside of sorts in a small presentation of Ukiyo-e reproductions, packaged with *ochazukenori* rice sprinkles from 1963 to 1997 in Japan.¹ As an exhibition, *Ukiyo-e: Japanese Prints of the Floating World* was thus anthropological in focus, and in this way brought to bear the frequently discounted complexities of the Japanese woodblock print and its history.

Ukiyo-e today has its place on the rarefied walls of art galleries and museums across the world, yet it is perhaps its incarnation on the rice sprinkles’ collectible mini-cards that most readily recalls its original function and character. Mass-produced in accord with prevailing popular tastes; and widely distributed and consumed, Ukiyo-e was a truly popularist art. There was collaboration involved throughout the enterprise: between artist and craftsman; as well as implicitly between publishers and the public. It was in this way that Ukiyo-e was inseparable from the culture which both inspired and supported the
trade as a whole. Emerging from the Edo of the late seventeenth century, woodblock prints gave expression to a newly prosperous merchant class existent in its rigidly stratified society. Between the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Japan’s social geography was radically transformed by policies pursued by Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536-1598) and the succeeding Tokugawa. In relocating its warrior-class from the country to castle towns, urbanisation was introduced on a large scale; and where there had previously been just one major city — Kyoto — the period established in Edo an ‘Eastern Capital,’ which by 1721 had become the most populous urban centre in the world. Formerly of no more significance than any other regional fishing village, Edo’s rapid growth in both population and consequence acted to position it as rival to Kyoto’s bastion of national heritage and tradition. Robert T. Singer has observed the way in which cities are present not only as physical environments but also as “composite mental fictions.” As applied to Edo, this notion of an intangible urban reality draws out characteristics which were central to its standing in the cultural imagination; its youth as a city fostering attitudes of boldness, playfulness and experimentation, in notable contrast to Kyoto’s conservatism. The Ukiyo-e woodcut served to both reflect and reinforce such conceptions of Edo's civic personality, such that, in works as by Andō Hiroshige, the medium came to record what have been termed “urban portraits” of the city.

The intimate kinship between the woodblock print and the city of Edo is presented quite literally in Andō Hiroshige’s prodigious 100 Famous Views of Edo series, of which thirteen were presented in the exhibition. Begun in 1856, following Hiroshige’s retirement to Buddhist monastic life, the scale and ingenuity of the project was unprecedented. In particular, it introduced innovative framing devices, such as the snow-laden branches which foreground Meguri Atagoskta and Yabu Lane or the drying cloths which extend such a striking horizontal plane in Hatsune Riding Grounds, Bakuro-chō. Added to the generally
asymmetrical, flattened and angular composition that typified Ukiyo-e, these visual elements combine to put forth a rich — however stylised — evocation of nineteenth-century Edo. A confluence of residents, tourists and varied classes, the city’s cultural vibrancy and bustle is captured in Hiroshige’s ‘snapshot’-like designs, with figures caught on the edges of the frame, as though they had just entered it.\(^7\) This sense of movement and dynamism was, in spite of expressive restrictions inherent in the print format, another hallmark of Ukiyo-e design. Printmaking’s tending towards a largely static line can also seem to be countered by the three fluttering sparrows featured in *Meguri Atagoskta and Yabu Lane*s snowscape. Asymmetrically positioned against a falling night, the birds additionally bring into focus the series’ preoccupation with the natural world. Seasonal change is a recurrent motif, as well as the different casts of light observable in a single day, such as at twilight or under a crescent moon. In symbols of impermanence such as these, Ukiyo prints were inscribed with the notions that were at the heart of the school itself.

As suggested by *ukiyo’s* English translation to ‘Floating World’ (‘e’ translates simply to ‘pictures’) ephemerality and impermanence were factors elemental to the Ukiyo-e outlook. Though the word ukiyo had its origin in a Buddhist term connoting a ‘Sorrowful World,’ as it developed over the years and took on different characters in its spelling, so did it grow away from its root in religious philosophy.\(^8\) Ukiyo as celebrated in the woodblock print promoted a lifestyle definitively in opposition to staid philosophising, or indeed to a world view marked in any way by sorrow. Decadent in its insouciance and sensuousness, “living only for the moment”\(^9\) was the guiding principle; though it must be noted that this can only have been within sight for the affluent classes at which Ukiyo-e were aimed. The Floating World ideal is aptly illustrated in Utagawa Kunisada II’s *Fashionable Lord Genji and women of the court* [...] (c. 1867), where two boatfuls of aristocratic ladies recline in attitudes of supreme leisure and diversion. A triptych of prints, it is framed at the top by cherry blossoms, which invoke seasonal transience as well as offering again Ukiyo-e’s typically complex compositional values. Taken
together, the works displayed in *Ukiyo-e: Japanese Prints of the Floating World* provided an array of views in which mid-nineteenth century Edo — or at least its stylised idealisation — was brought out, both in the subjects depicted and the cultural values from which inspiration was drawn. For fin-de-siècle Paris, exhibitions comparable in subject, if of far greater novelty and sensational impact, were central to the sparking of the “fashionable mania” 10 of *japonisme*, which was to have a keen influence on the Impressionist movement.

The end to Japan’s isolationist programme in the mid-nineteenth century and its subsequent opening onto the international arena coincided with Western modernisation’s increasingly globalised and transnational interests. This outward-looking and far-ranging — yet undeniably mercantile — gaze was made manifest in the era’s World Fair culture, which provided in 1867 a first contact with Japan at the Paris Universal Exposition. Presented in this venue, however, its national arts and culture were necessarily introduced on the terms of, and in relation to, European imperialism. Indeed, Anne Maxwell has offered that *japonisme* itself was “a way of taking visual possession of [Japan’s] culture,”11 and perhaps, in their claiming of Ukiyo-e artists as their own, the Impressionists were implicated in this colonialist dynamic.12 But statements such as Pissarro’s pronouncing of Hiroshige to be “a marvellous Impressionist”13 were also motivated by the Impressionists’ discovery in Ukiyo-e of qualities that were greatly in sympathy with their own artistic priorities. Firstly, such striking expressions of urbanity as exemplified in the *100 Views of Edo* series aligned closely with the changed pace of life that attended industrialisation and modernisation in Europe at the time. The Impressionists’ insistence on depictions of the quotidian and recreational were also exampled in Ukiyo-e, with its vibrant evocations of the Floating World, and “celebration of ordinary scenes and events.”14 Further, Impressionist landscapists found fresh inspiration in Ukiyo-e’s astute renderings of seasonal change and weather
conditions. This influence can be seen quite directly in comparing Pissarro's *Rain Effects* (1897) with Hiroshige's *Evening Rain at Karasaki* (1830) or of course, Van Gogh's own tribute to Hiroshige in *Bridge in the Rain (After Hiroshige)* (1887). The Impressionist rebellion against the French Academy also had a parallel in Ukiyo-e's own break from tradition, though this was probably beyond their knowledge.

Originally vended on the streets of Edo as the "posters [...] or picture postcards of their day," the Ukiyo-e woodcut has had an impact vastly disproportionate to its intended function as simple ornament to the city's burgeoning middle-class. But the close interchange which its mass-produced and mass-consumed enterprise entailed must be considered as integral to its broad appeal. Like the Impressionist's defiance of institutionalised and elitist strictures on art production in fin-de-siècle Paris, Ukiyo-e constituted a democratising impulse in its embodiment of Edo's irreverent and dynamic civic identity. So tied to the city in this way, the visual innovations introduced to printmaking by Ukiyo-e cannot be seen in isolation from the culture, sensibilities, and social makeup of the period; and as such were fittingly exhibited in the anthropological Berndt Museum.

**Footnotes**


Bibliography


