浮世絵 UKIYO-E
JAPANESE PRINTS OF THE FLOATING WORLD
BERNDT MUSEUM
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Japanese woodblock prints represent an astonishing insight into facets of 18th and 19th century Japan. They capture a moment in time, an emotional response to an event, a person, or a distant view. Individually, they embody an impression, literally, of an instant in time; collectively, they epitomize an exceptional triumph in the craftsmanship of a woodblock printer’s art.

The technique of Japanese woodblock printing, 木版画, moku hanga, is identified most closely with the genre of art Ukiyo-e, 浮世絵, commonly translated as ‘pictures of the floating world’. The method was adapted from Chinese book printing techniques during the Edo period (1603 - 1867) and it developed into a distinctive art form, using water-based inks to provide a wide range of vivid colours often possessing extraordinary transparency. Despite early 17th century experiments with the use of moveable wooden type to produce books, craftsmen preferred engraved woodblocks for book production, and this medium was rapidly adopted by artists in the production of small cheap art prints for a mass market.

These classic tales became particularly widely published, and were greatly appreciated, particularly among members of the middle classes. This was not, however, an aristocratic phenomenon: it was an early manifestation of populist art, broadly accessible and widely appreciated. Created by a number of different schools, or movements, that developed across Japan, the outpouring of prints represented a new form of mass-communication, which was embedded culturally in its expression of national and local likenesses and representations.
Ronald Berndt started collecting Ukiyo-e when he was young. In later life, he and Catherine Berndt collected many more together, frequenting curio shops in Adelaide and Sydney, and also during periods of study abroad: London in 1954, and in 1968 when they were in Japan. They both held a life-long fascination with such technically accomplished works, visually stunning in their colours and transparency, and equally dramatic in their subject matter.

Ukiyo-e played a unique role in informing the Western world of Japanese aesthetics and preconceptions, transfixing the art of Gauguin and van Gogh, among others. The Impressionists were particularly fascinated with the play of light and shade characterised so strongly in the woodblock prints; the subtle gradations of colour amplified the expressions of form and structure, and articulated so intensely the sense of immediacy and strength embodied in the works. Ukiyo-e also served to reinforce a national sense of self and locality within Japan, their depictions of actors from the Kabuki theatre accentuating their star-like status among members of the middle classes of the period. Their roles as mythological and historical figures confirm their position as emissaries of contemporary taste and subtlety, delicately portraying events real and imagined that assert cultural norms and exemplary behaviour—both good and bad. Ukiyo-e portray scenes from the Japanese landscape, often familiar, and always convincing; these woodblock prints compound colour with form, shape with arrangement, communicating the dense overlay of cultural knowledge and understanding over earthly delights: sensual, cognitive and spiritual.

John E. Stanton
CAMPUS PARTNERS
Berndt Museum would like to acknowledge its campus partners for 浮世絵 Ukiyo-e: Japanese prints of the floating world, Asian Studies, School of Social Sciences, Faculty of Arts, UWA

Since its inception in 1993, Asian Studies at UWA has dedicated research and teaching to contemporary Asian societies and cultures. Asian Studies includes knowledge and expertise from the disciplines of politics, economics, geography, anthropology, history, language and cultural studies, and linguistics. As part of the Exhibition’s rich Public Program, Assistant Professor Natsuko Akagawa will deliver two specialist talks about Japanese cultural life that will be open to the public.

Cover image:
Utagawa Kunisada II (active 1823 - 1830), Fashionable Lord Genji and women of the court in a pleasure boat encountering women in smaller craft floating sake cups on the water, c. 1847, published by Ningyo Takichi. Woodblock print (triptych), Oban format 37 x 75 cm. RM & CH Berndt Collection, Berndt Museum [WU11969]

Image left:
Ando Hiroshige [1797-1858], Meguro Atagoshita and Itoke Lane (Atagoshita Kabuk-ji), 1856-1858, from the series 100 Views of Edo published by Uoya Eikichi. Woodblock print, Oban format 35 x 24 cm. RM & CH Berndt Collection, Berndt Museum [WU8128]

Inside images:
Utagawa Kunisada (1786 - 1864), Kataoka Gatō II as Miho no Tani Kunitoshi in the Kabuki play thought to be Danmari mitate, 1851, published by Bunkindō. Woodblock print (centre panel of a triptych), Oban format 34.2 x 24 cm. RM & CH Berndt Collection, Berndt Museum [WU8780]

Ando Hiroshige [1797 - 1858], Hatauma Riding Grounds, Bakuro-chō (Bakuro-chō Hatauma no Babal, 1857, from the series 100 Views of Edo published by Uoya Eikichi. Woodblock print, Oban format 36 x 24 cm. RM & CH Berndt Collection, Berndt Museum [WU8717]

Utagawa Kunisada (1786 - 1864), The Actor Nakamura Fuksuke as Nakaya Shion wśród with the ghost of a giant rat conjured up by the magician Kanya Youhatake, 1854, published by Ebisuya Shōbōichi. Woodblock print, Oban format 37.1 x 25 cm. RM & CH Berndt Collection, Berndt Museum [WU8761]

Ando Hiroshige [1797 - 1858], Fukagawa Susaki and Jiountsubo (Fukagawa Susaki Jiountsubo, 1857, from the series 100 Views of Edo published by Uoya Eikichi. Woodblock print, Oban format 35 x 24 cm. RM & CH Berndt Collection, Berndt Museum [WU8777]

Ando Hiroshige [1797 - 1858], Suruga-chō, 1856, from the series 100 Views of Edo published by Uoya Eikichi. Woodblock print, Oban format 36 x 24.5 cm. RM & CH Berndt Collection, Berndt Museum [WU8718]

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