

# Revisiting Japan:

## **An exhibition of Japanese woodblock prints from the traditional Edo period ukiyo-e, Meiji-Taisho-Showa shin hanga and sosaku hanga**

The present exhibition follows the previous ones on Japanese prints exhibited at the Janet Turner Print Museum. A major difference in this exhibition is the involvement of the students from the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI, part of the Regional and Continuing Education Program, CSU, Chico). Their involvement in the OLLI program provides a new and expanded venue for publicly sharing the holdings of the Museum according to the wish of the founding figure, the late Professor Janet Turner, who collected significant, selective and quality prints from across the world for instructional purposes and public sharing.

The title of the current exhibition does not carry the rich content of what the viewers will experience. The woodblock prints included here were initially selected from the Turner Print Collection by Catherine Sullivan, the museum curator, and myself, and include recently donated prints. The exhibition prints range from the traditional Edo period (1603-1868) familiar ukiyo-e woodblock prints, to shin hanga (new print) and sosaku hanga (creative print) from the Meiji (1868-1912), Taisho (1912-1925) and Showa (1925-1989) periods.

The expression ukiyo-e is typically reflective of the affluent townspeople of large cities such as Edo (about 1 million in population by 1800, twice the size of comparable London and Paris) and Osaka, where those common people were highly educated, and thus the demands for the reproducible woodblock prints were high among them.

The characteristics of the Edo period woodblock ukiyo-e production is that the publisher controlled the entire process, from hiring artists for original designs, to retaining engravers who meticulously transformed the original designs into woodblocks, and printers who processed printing of these blocks, often involving more than ten different blocks.

The publisher is also in control of marketing the finished prints and also bound books, which are not included here but the Turner Museum has a significant holding, including recently donated 1802 treaties on landscape paintings in the traditional "mountain and water" manner by Ike no Taiga. The publisher is also sensitive to what subjects will appeal to the potential audience. Thus, the entire process of producing the Edo period ukiyo-e woodblock prints is not much different from today's publisher dictated the publishing world.

As for the shin hanga (new print) and shosaku hanga (creative print), their brief definitions are due here. Essentially speaking, the shin hanga refers to those prints produced in the Meiji continuing from the former period. Characteristics of the shin hanga are that they deviated from the set subject formula of the Edo ukiyo-e prints as a result of Western influences encouraged by the new Meiji government. The subjects are more varied than previously, and also the multiple printing capacity of the woodblock printing process was suited to newspaper and magazine illustrations. These include newspaper coverage of the Sino-Japanese (1894-1895) and Russo-

Japanese (1904-1905) wars in the late 19th century to early 20th century. The shin hanga production continued well into the 20th century, with its peak in the first half of the century from about 1915 to 1942.

The sosaku hanga (creative prints) already appeared as early 1909, with its peak from the 1920s to 1950s. This refers to the artist's self-engraved and self-printed prints in woodblock and other print media (e.g., stencil prints) not included in the current exhibition.

Unlike the two previous format, the artists of the sosaku hanga had a greater control in the production of their prints despite the number of impressions is much smaller (usually in the range of 200). The personal creative acts in the production of their prints become the critical issue, not be to be shared by other "artisans." The artists had a total control of the printing process and design at every step of the production, deciding on their designs, selecting their paper, preparing their own blocks (often experimenting inclusion of other items than wood), mixing the pigments, printing the images and even marketing their prints on their own.

The sosaku hanga subjects are both traditional and Western-influenced. Their aesthetics also vary from Japanese to Western depending on their subjects.

The preparation of the current exhibition began with my three-part lectures on the history of Japanese prints to the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute in February of this year, with some 60 students participating. From them, about 1/3 continued to the hands-on research and detective segment, whose result is seen in this exhibition. Turner Print Museum curator Catherine Sullivan selected the Japanese prints from the Turner Collection that had not yet been researched and assisted student visitations and Turner Museum research. OLLI students selected their prints to study and research, and produced notes on them, which are to be archived at the Turner Print Museum for its references and future use. In this sense, the brave OLLI students, who put themselves into this exciting discovery process, are to be admired. At the same time, this collaborative work further expands the intent and value of what the late Janet Turner collected and donated to the university, a unique presence not available to cities and towns between Sacramento and Oregon.

Finally, I oversaw the entire research production by the OLLI students and made additions and corrections to them. I am solely responsible for decipher of the Japanese inscriptions appearing on these prints.

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October 2011