

The world of the Japanese Woodblock Print

Week 2 Ukiyo-e: The Golden Age of Japanese print

U3A 21 July 2025 Michael Harrington

Changes in weekly topics

Week 1 Introduction to the Japanese woodblock print.

Week 2 Ukiyo-e: The golden age of Japanese print -18th & 19th centuries

Week 3 Ukiyo-e in the West - Japonisme

Week 4 Western woodblock artists and 20th century Shin Hanga

Week 5 Introduction to the life and art of Paul Jacoulet

Week 6 Travels in the South Seas and beyond- In the footsteps of Gauguin

Week 7 Emergence as a woodblock print artist

Week 8 WWII and beyond - success and final years in Karuizawa

Week 9 The Japanese woodblock print world today - artists and collectors

Week 10 See Jacoulet's work in the Queensland Art Gallery exhibition Birds of Passage: Ian Fairweather & Paul Jacoulet

Week 2 outline

Week 1 review

Finish video on woodblock print making

Intro to ukiyo-e

Social & Historical Context

Early development

Subject matter

Aesthetic style

Schools of artists

Review #1

Types of Japanese woodblocks

》 Ukiyo-e 浮世絵
Edo Period Early 17th–
mid 19th century

》 Shin Hanga 新版画
Early 20th century

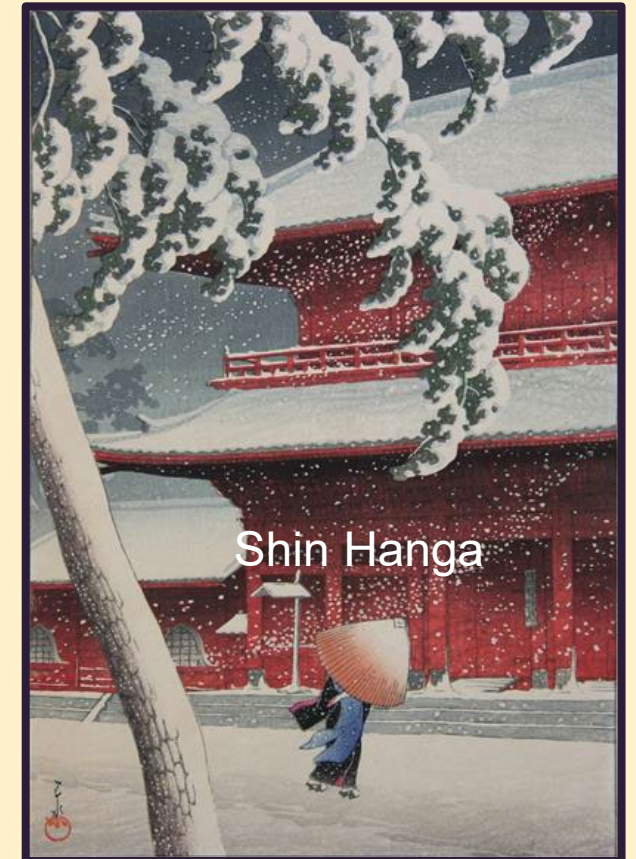
》 Sōsaku Hanga 創作版画
Early 20th century



Ukiyo-e



Sōsaku Hanga



Shin Hanga

Review #2

Traditional Woodblock Production

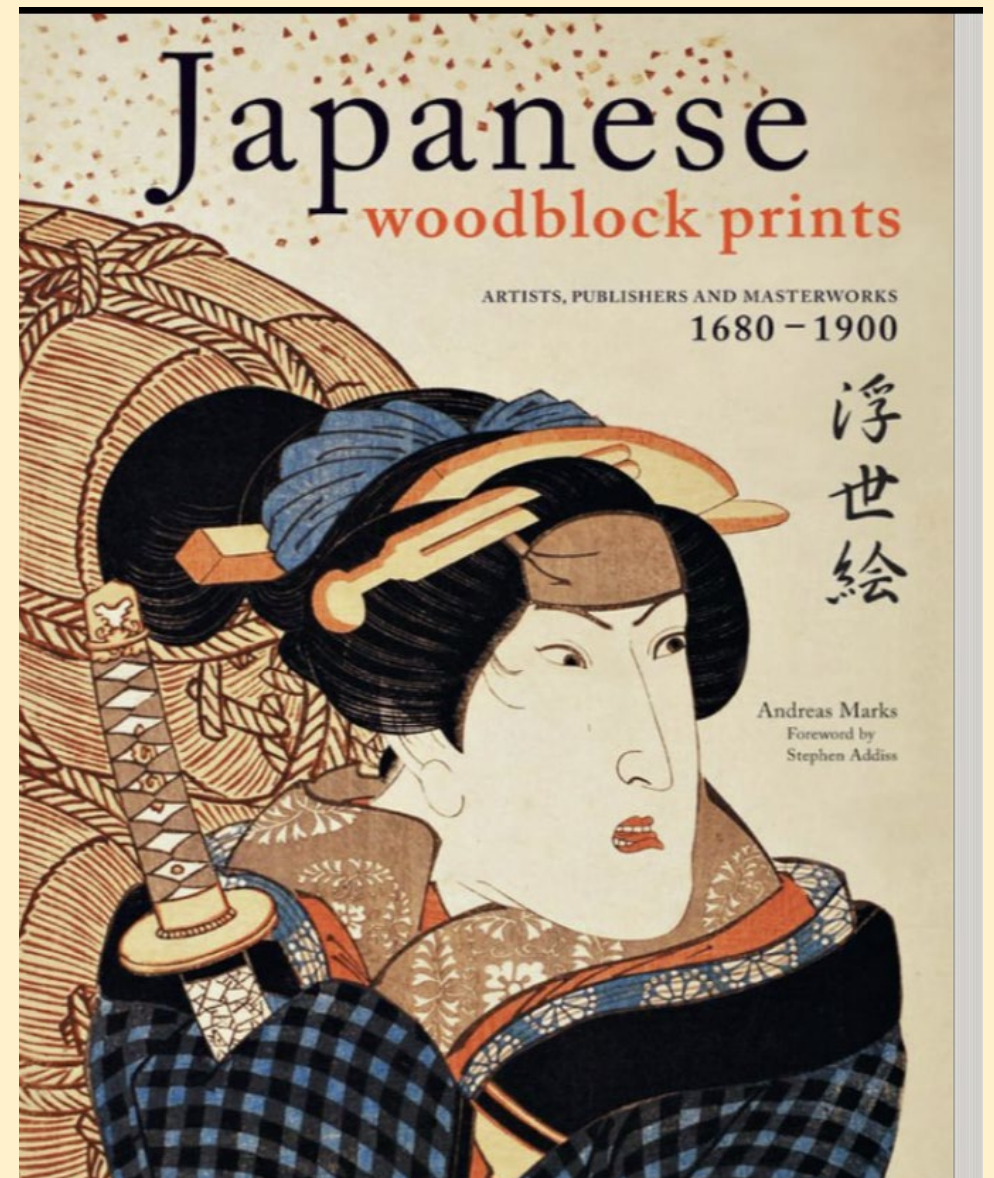
Publisher <<<< Printer <<<< Carver <<<< Artist (< publisher)



Utagawa Kunisada (1786-1865)

Good source on ukiyo-e

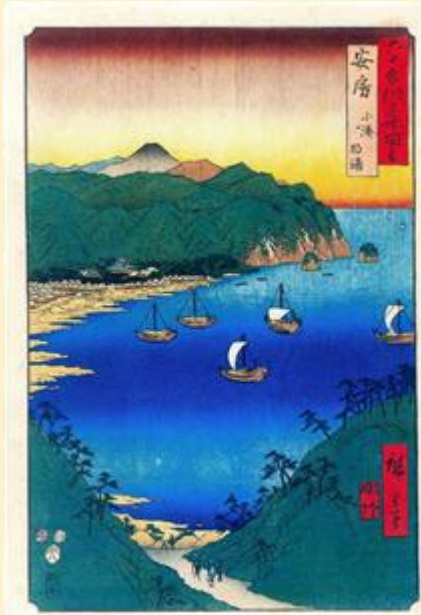
Japanese Woodblock Prints, Andreas Marks, 2020
PDF available for free.



<https://archive.org/details/andreas-marks-japanese-woodblock-prints-andreas-marks/page/33/mode/2up>

Ukiyo-e: Art of the Floating World (17th–19th Century)

- Ukiyo-e = 'pictures of the floating world'
- Woodblock prints & paintings of Edo-period Japan
- Themes: beauty, theater, landscapes, daily life



Tokugawa Social Hierarchy (Edo Period)

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- Emperor – 天皇 (*Tennō*)
 - Shogun – 将軍 (*Shōgun*)
 - Daimyo – 大名 (*Daimyō*)
 - Samurai – 侍 (*Samurai*)
 - Peasants – 農民 (*Nōmin*)
 - Artisans – 職人 (*Shokunin*)
 - Merchants – 商人 (*Shōnin*)
 - Outcasts – えた・ひにん (*Eta / Hinin*)



Social & Historical Context

- Tokugawa shogunate (1603–1868): peace and stability
- Rise of urban merchant class (chōnin)
- Flourishing urban culture: theaters, pleasure quarters, travel



What is 'Ukiyo'?

- Buddhist origin: impermanence and suffering

The term "*ukiyo*" in medieval Japan was associated with Buddhism and meant "this transient, unreliable world". The term *ukiyo* (憂き世, "sorrowful world"), referred to the earthly plane of death and rebirth from which Buddhists sought release.

- Edo reinterpretation: pleasures of fleeting moments

Ukiyo ('floating/fleeting/transient world') is the term used to describe the urban lifestyle and culture, especially the pleasure-seeking aspects, of the Edo period (1600–1867). When written as meaning "the floating world" (浮世) in Edo period is it meant as an ironic, homophonous allusion to the earlier Buddhist term.

*Also referred to as the **demimonde**, a French 19th-century term referring to women on the fringes of respectable society, and specifically to courtesans supported by wealthy lovers. The *demi-monde* was the world occupied by elite men and the women who entertained them and whom they kept.*



Yoshiwara



Cherry Trees along Gokacho in New Yoshiwara by Utagawa Hiroshige c1835.png

From the series "Famous Places in the Eastern Capital" Hiroshige proposes here a view of the cherry blossoms of Edo, present-day Tokyo, from Yoshiwara, the red light district or pleasure district of Edo, authorized by the shogunate. Filled with brothels and kabuki theaters, and immersed in an aura of a certain mystery and refinement, Yoshiwara (吉原, "The Good Luck Meadow") represented the prevailing philosophy of the ukiyo era, or floating world. These red light districts, which proliferated in all the large cities, were highly frequented by merchants and artisans, key figures in the emergence of the characteristic urban lifestyle of Edo, and were also allowed access to the rōnin, masterless samurai, a once a year to see the hanami (花見) or cherry blossom." WikiArts

Early Development

- 17th century beginnings – black & white ink drawings to color
- Hishikawa Moronobu's early influence

Hand painted



Beauty Looking Back (見返り美人図) c. 1680–1683, Hishikawa Moronobu 菱川師宣

The shift to color printing

- 1760s: shift to full-color nishiki-e (“brocade prints”)
- Team effort: artist, publisher, carver, printer
- Multiple blocks for colors



Polychrome ukiyo-e



"Fuzoku Edo Hakkei, Sumidagawa no Rakugan" (Wild Geese Flying Down the Sumida River)
The Metropolitan Museum of Art (JP2780)

Suzuki Harunobu (鈴木 春信; c. 1725 –1770) was the first to produce full-color prints ([nishiki-e](#)) in 1765.

Technical Innovations

bokashi (gradation, 暈し)

Printing technique for **soft color transitions** (e.g., sky, water, mist) achieved by hand applying ink unevenly on the woodblock before printing. Enabled **atmospheric effects** and depth in prints. Perfected by artists like Hokusai and Hiroshige.

karazuri, (blind printing, 空刷り, also known as gaufrage)

Refers to a technique where a raised design is pressed into the paper using a woodblock without ink. This creates a subtle, three-dimensional texture on the print, adding an extra layer of visual interest.

See next slide



神田明神曙之景 Hiroshige
Dawn at Kanda Myojin Shrine

Kazari (blind printing)



Lovers Walking in the Snow (Crow and Heron) (蟬雪の中を行く—からすとさぎあいず)
Suzuki Harunobu— c. 1764–72



Woman Reading a Letter under a Mosquito Net
Kitagawa Utamaro ca. 1798

Aesthetic Style:

- ❑ Flat color, strong outlines, bold compositions
- ❑ Focus on mood, atmosphere, and pattern over realism
- ❑ Decorative and accessible



Sixth month Twelve months from the Southern Quarter_ Torii Kiyonaga 1784



Bijin-ga: Beautiful Women

- Celebrating feminine beauty and fashion
- Utamaro's expressive portraits

Utamaro's Three Beauties of the Present Day c. 1793]



Kabuki & Actors

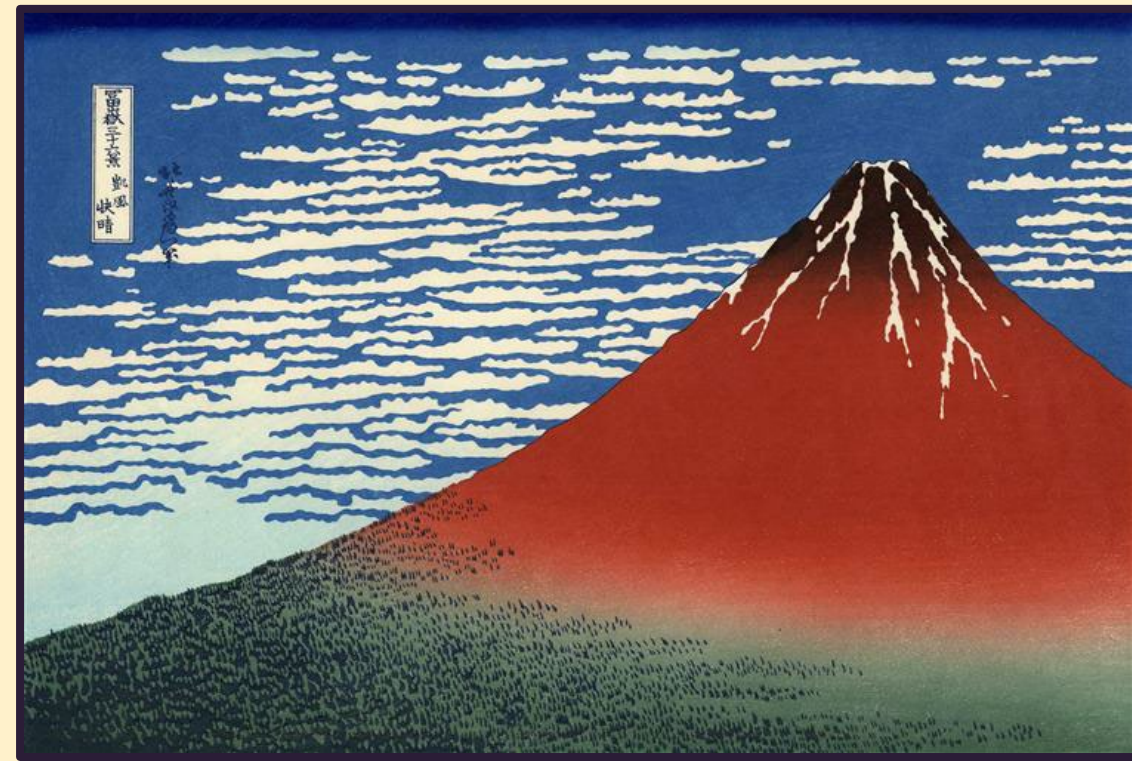
- Yakusha-e: portraits of kabuki actors
- Sharaku's dramatic and expressive faces

Sharaku's Kabuki
Actor Otani Oniji
III c 1794



Landscapes & Travel

- Hokusai's *Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji* →
- Hiroshige's poetic travel series (*Tōkaidō, One Hundred Famous Views of Edo*) ↓
- Tourism boom influenced demand



Other Genres: Warriors, Nature, Stories

- Musha-e: warrior prints, hero tales
- Ka-chō-ga: birds and flowers
- Satirical and humorous works



Kuniyoshi, Rorai Hakucho Chojun, from the series 108 Heroes of the Suikoden, c.1828, woodblock print, Ronin Gallery.

Shunga: Erotic Art in Ukiyo-e

- Shunga (春画) literally means “spring pictures.”
- Erotic imagery widely produced
- Entertaining and talismanic - bringing good luck and warding off evil



A man interrupts woman combing her long hair.
Utamaro 1799



The Dream of the Fisherman's Wife. Hokusai 1814



Caught in the Act.
Suzuki Harunobu c. 1770



Schools of Ukiyo-e

- **Torii**: kabuki posters

Torii Kiyonaga (鳥居清長, 1752–1815)

- **Katsukawa**: actor portraits

Katsukawa Shunshō (勝川春章, 1726–1792) (teacher of Hokusai)

- **Utagawa**: dominant in 19th century

Hiroshige (歌川広重, 1797–1858), **Kuniyoshi** (歌川国芳, 1798–1861), **Kunisada** (歌川国貞, 1786–1865)

- **Hokusai** and **Utamaro** are generally considered independent

Reception by Masses & Literati

- Affordable art for townspeople
- Appreciated by elites as well

Utagawa Kuniyoshi
Landscapes and Beauties- Feeling Like
Reading the Next Volume Late 19th
century



Nagasaki-e and Yokohama-e: Foreigners & New Worlds

- Nagasaki-e: woodblock prints (18th–early 19th c.) depicting foreign merchants (Chinese, Dutch) in Nagasaki's Dejima trading post
- Yokohama-e: prints from 1859 onward showing foreigners, technology, and scenes from the newly opened port city of Yokohama. See next slide
- Reflected curiosity, fascination, and sometimes caricature of the West

Chinese at Nagasaki. Author unknown, before 1868



Foreigners dining at Dejima. Author unknown, before 1868

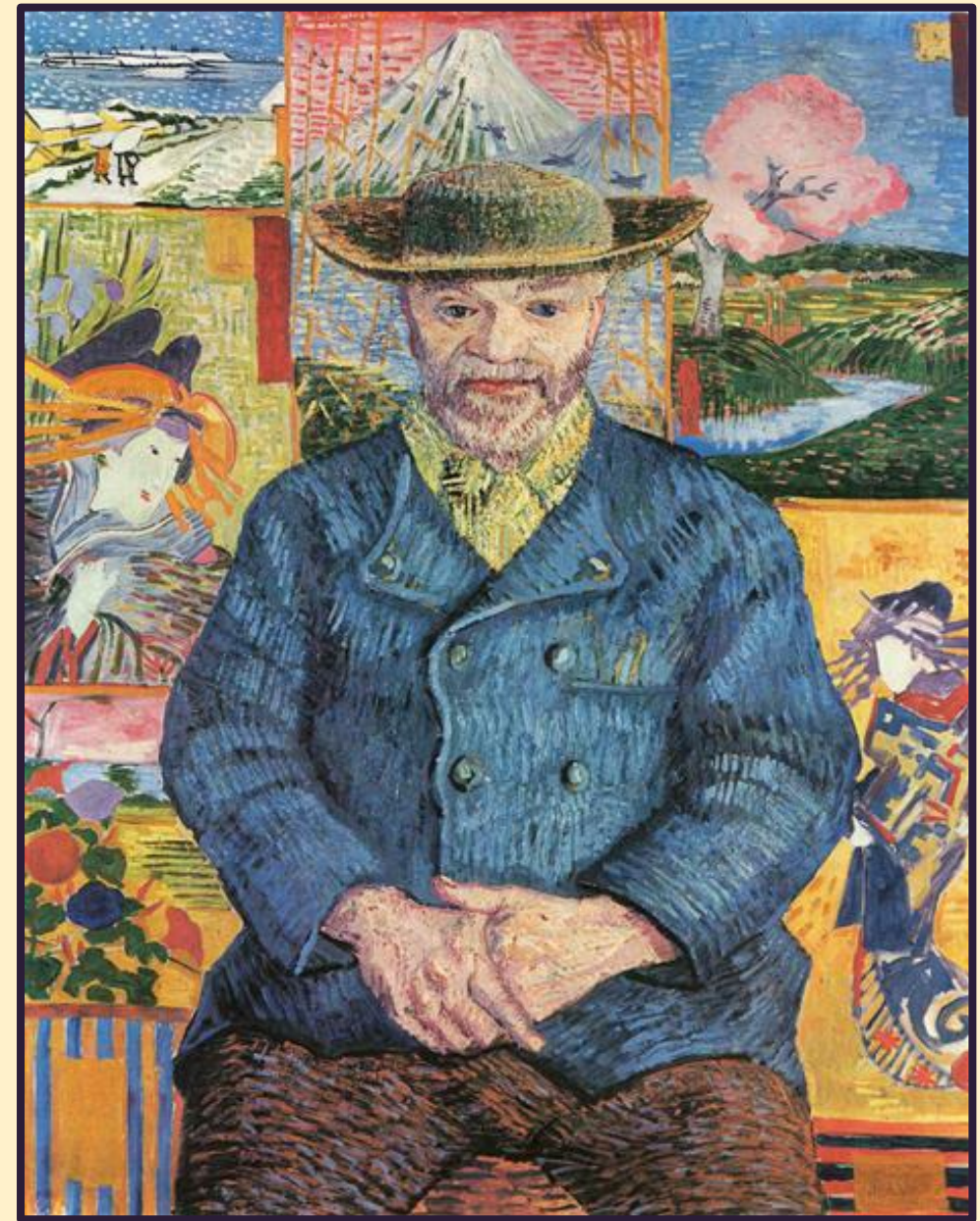
Yokohama-e



First steam train leaving Yokohama. Utagawa Kunisada III, 1872

Next: International Impact (19th c.): A Glimpse Westward

- ❑ Japan opens to the West (1854 Treaty of Kanagawa)
- ❑ Surge in exports: ceramics, textiles, ukiyo-e prints
- ❑ Western fascination grows: “Japonisme” begins
- ❑ Ukiyo-e inspires European artists (Impressionists, Post-Impressionists)



Père Tanguy Vincent van Gogh (c. 1888)



Week 2 Wrap up