

Japanese Woodblock Prints:

How Ukiyo-e Were Made and Read

- Read ukiyo-e two ways: collaborative craft process and visual language
- Ukiyo-e means 'pictures of the floating world' — popular, commercial Edo art (1615–1868)
- Museum visitors read labels; collectors judge impression, state, condition
- Two misconceptions: prints were commercial products; a 'multiple' can be original
- Roadmap: patronage, production team, technique, genres, seals, market, gallery
- Key terms: hanga, hanmoto, edition, impression, state, nishiki-e



The Floating World: Edo Society, Patronage, and the Print Business

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Session 1 — The Floating World: Edo Society, Patronage, and the Print Business

- Edo: from fishing village to a city of one million by 1720
- Chōnin wealth, low status — spent on entertainment and pictures
- Yoshiwara and kabuki: twin engines of subject matter and celebrity
- Prints as commercial network: guilds, wholesalers, *ezōshiya*, travelers
- Censorship shapes content: Kansei Reforms 1790, Tenpō *ban* 1842–47



Four Hands, One Print: Publisher, Artist, Carver, Printer

Hanmoto
(publisher)



- Hanmoto (publisher) plans and finances; owns the blocks, controls reprints

Eshi
(artist)



- Eshi (artist) draws the design and issues color instructions only

Horishi
(carver)



- Horishi (carver) cuts keyblock and one block per color; kewari takes a decade

Surishi
(printer)



- Surishi (printer) inks blocks and pulls each sheet by hand

- Only artist and publisher are credited — carver and printer stay anonymous



From Drawing to Block: Materials and the Carving Stage

- The *shita-e* sketch becomes the *hanshita-e*: fine black lines on thin, semi-transparent paper
- The *hanshita-e* is pasted face-down and carved through; the original drawing is destroyed
- Yamazakura (mountain cherry): fine-grained, stable when damp; tsuge inlaid for very fine lines
- The keyblock (*sumi-ban*) carries outlines only; proofs are pulled and the artist marks one color per sheet
- Color blocks are cut one per color, often carving both sides to save wood
- Standard *nishiki-e*: about 10 colors from 5 blocks; elaborate works reach 8–20 blocks



Registration and Printing: How Color Lands in the Right Place

- Kentō: L-shaped kagi plus straight hikitsuke carved into each block
- Printer seats paper corner and edge; colors stay in register
- Around 1765, kentō made full-color nishiki-e possible
- Order: pale to dark, small areas to large
- Water-based pigment with rice paste, pressed into damp kōzo paper by baren
- Bokashi shading done by hand each sheet — no two impressions identical
- Finishing touches: karazuri embossing, shomenzuri burnishing, mica



The Color Revolution: From Sumizuri-e to Nishiki-e



Sumizuri-e



Hand-colored



Urushi-e



Benizuri-e rose-red
and green (1740s)



Full-color nishiki-e

- Chronology: sumizuri-e → hand-colored → urushi-e → benizuri-e rose-red and green (1740s) → full-color nishiki-e
- 1765 breakthrough: full-color calendars (*e-goyomi*) for wealthy patrons, then commercialized
- Suzuki Harunobu (c. 1725–1770): finer cherry blocks, costlier pigments, five to ten colors
- Artist names colors; the printer's mixing and layering fixes the final tone
- Prussian blue from about 1830 gave landscapes their intense blues



Reading the Genres: Actors, Beauties, *Warriors*, and Landscapes



yakusha-e
(actors)



bijin-ga
(beauties)



musha-e
(warriors)



fukei-ga and meisho-e
(landscapes, famous places)

- Five core genres: *yakusha-e* (actors), *bijin-ga* (beauties), *musha-e* (warriors), *fukei-ga* and *meisho-e* (landscapes, famous places)
- *Yakusha-e* worked as celebrity media and advertising, timed to specific kabuki performances
- Actors shown in the *mie* pose — frozen climactic stance with crossed gaze
- *Bijin-ga* documents fashion and social codes: hairstyles, obi tying, textile pattern
- Landscape prints served Edo's travel culture — cheap souvenirs, sold as series
- Read cartouches for series title, print title, and actor-role-play in *yakusha-e*



How Edo Viewers Read a Print: Visual Codes and Playful Allusions

- Ukiyo-e assumed viewers knew the references: actors, roles, places, seasons, classics
- Seasonal and poetic coding (*kigo*, *hon'i*): a flower or weather event fixes mood
- Mitate-e means seeing one thing as another: a beauty cast as a classical poet
- Mitate also helped artists approach satire while evading censorship
- Wordplay and pictorial rebuses appear in titles and cartouches
- Museum labels and databases help recover lost references today



Decoding the Marks:

Signatures, Publisher Seals, and Censor Seals



Signature



Artist seal



Publisher mark



Censor seal



Date seal

- Where to look: series title, artist signature and seal, publisher mark, censor seal, date seal
- Suffixes like 'ga' (drawn by) or 'hitsu' (from the brush) vary by career stage; Hokusai used 60+ names
- Censor seals date prints closely: kiwame (1790–1842), nanushi names (1843), aratame with zodiac date (c. 1853)
- Date seals give a zodiac animal and month, but the zodiac repeats every twelve years — cross-check
- Trimmed margins or mismatched colophons should prompt questions about authenticity

Judging Impression, State, and Condition

- Ukiyo-e were never limited editions: 'original' means printed in the artist's lifetime
- Early impressions show sharp lines; later pulls lose detail
- Hiroshige's *Sudden Shower*: two distant boats vanish in later impressions
- Condition matters: fading, trimming, wormholes, and backing can cut value 50%+
- Fresh, unfaded color is the strongest visual signal of value
- Atozuri, fukkoku, and posters are legitimate — but never sold as originals



Early Impression



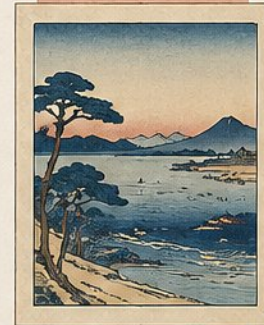
Later Pull

The Market Landscape and Caring for Prints

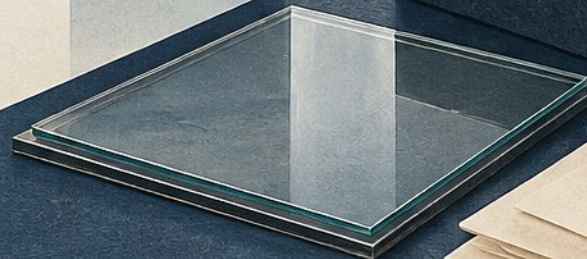
- Two-tier market: masterworks set records, most prints trade modestly
- Price bands: masterworks six to seven figures; good originals a few hundred to a few thousand
- Prices rise with early impression, unfaded color, intact margins, rarity, provenance
- Hiroshige revival: US buyers now displace the French trade center
- Care: UV-filtering glass, acid-free mounts, dim light, archival storage
- Ask sellers: original, reprint, or reproduction — and condition details



Masterworks
six to seven
figures

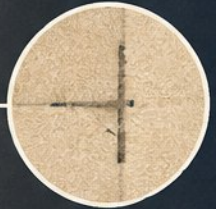


Good originals
a few hundred
to a few thousand



Looking Closely in the Gallery: A Practical Checklist

- Begin at viewing distance; move close for line, registration, paper
- Borrow a magnifier — some museums lend them free
- Compare two impressions of one design: *bokashi* and line sharpness differ
- Check in order: paper, keyblock lines, registration, embossing, seals, margins
- Cropped margins hide publisher marks; labels omit carver and printer
- Low light and rotation mean favorites rest — build reference habits



Case Studies: Hokusai, Hiroshige, Utamaro, Sharaku



- **Hokusai:** landscape made major; Prussian blue in Thirty-six Views (c. 1831)
- **Hiroshige:** *meisho-e* master; foreground-dominant composition reshaped landscape art
- **Utamaro:** *bijin-ga* as psychologically specific portraiture
- **Sharaku:** brief 1794–95 career; physiognomic actor prints, the *mie* on paper
- **Exercise:** walk one print through team, technique, genre, seals, condition

Bringing It Together: From Looking to Understanding



- Two lenses interlock: craft process explains the paper; visual language explains purpose
- Visitors: read composition, genre, marks, then judge impression and condition
- Collectors: confirm originality, color, margins, condition — then ask sellers directly
- Students: test readings against catalogues, primary sources, museum databases
- Avoid: calling a multiple unique, a worn late pull "original," or a mitate literal

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