

PRESS RELEASE



Japanese Prints 1860-1890

25 May - 24 July 2022

This exhibition presents, through three distinct topics, an overview of the great diversity of subjects and styles that characterize Japanese prints of the second half of the 19th century. All these works date to between 1860 and 1890, three decades corresponding to the last years of the Edo period 江戸 (1603-1868) and the beginning of the Meiji era 明治 (1868-1912); this was a crucial time in the history of modern Japan, marked by profound political and social changes brought about, among other things, by the opening of the country to ideas and technology from the West. In the first part of the exhibition, the “Pictures of Yokohama” (*Yokohama-e* 横浜絵) illustrate the early phase of this encounter, with an emphasis on the Westerner. In the second part, the *hashika-e* 麻疹絵 (“images of measles”) reflect the hopes and fears of the population faced with a deadly epidemic of that disease in 1862. The exhibition ends with a presentation of the great print designer Tsukioka Yoshitoshi 月岡芳年 (1839-1892), whose career spanned the years between 1863 and 1892: deeply attached to the history and values of his country, he was also a hugely innovative and creative artist.

The artists in this exhibition all belong to the prestigious Utagawa 歌川 school and represent the generation of the students of Hiroshige 広重 (1797-1858), Kunisada 國貞 (1786-1865), and Kuniyoshi 國芳 (1798-1861). Through their apprenticeship in their workshops, they were trained in a very wide range of subjects, from portraits of actors and women, to landscapes, warrior subjects, and humorous pictures. The same artists’ signatures appear on both the *Yokohama-e* and the *hashika-e*, all of them fellow students of Yoshitoshi who also contributed several compositions in these same categories.

These prints, which have for the most part never been shown before at the Baur Foundation, are selected from the Ida Votsch donation (1990) in the case of the measles prints, the Fonds Hughes Fontanet (2016) for the images of Yokohama, and the Cigarini donation (2019) for the works of Tsukioka Yoshitoshi. May all these donors be warmly thanked once again for their generosity.

Curator: Helen Loveday, curator, Baur Foundation, Museum of Far Eastern Art
Scenography: Nicole Gérard with the assistance of César Preda
Administration and coordination: Audrey Jouany Deroire
Communication : Leyla Caragnano

« Pictures of Yokohama »

The port of Yokohama, located some thirty kilometres from the capital, Edo (Tôkyô), was officially opened to foreign ships in July 1859 as a consequence of the signature of a series of commercial treaties (1854-1858) between Japan and five Western nations. Built in the space of a few months on marshy land, on the site of a small fishing village, the port grew rapidly, attracting both Japanese firms as well as merchants from overseas, each community residing in its own district of town. The foreign population grew from 250 mostly British inhabitants in 1861, to more than three thousand, of all nationalities, by the end of the 1870s, figures which fluctuated slightly with the arrival and departures of the ships. Though Westerners could not travel far outside the immediate perimeter of Yokohama and were not authorised to visit Edo, their presence near the capital aroused the curiosity of its inhabitants, and stimulated the production of a new type of print, known as *Yokohama-e* 横浜絵 or “pictures of Yokohama”.

Opportunities for the public to see the foreigners for themselves being extremely rare, these prints became the main source of information available about the lifestyle, dress, and customs of the Westerners. The accuracy of the information which could be gleaned from these images was deemed much less important than the wonderfully exotic and entertaining world that they conveyed.

The subject matter of *Yokohama-e* was mainly devoted to the port and its inhabitants: aerial views of the town showing its various districts, close-ups of ships and daily life on board, scenes from the pleasure district of Miyozaki, as well as the foreigners themselves, principally the representatives of the five signatory nations of the treaties – the United States, Great-Britain, France, Holland, and Russia – as well as China.

Some 850 *Yokohama-e* designs were produced between 1860 and 1872; however, the majority of these were printed over a very short period from 1860 to 1862, often rapidly and in large print runs, using worn woodblocks. From the beginning of the Meiji era in 1868, the popularity of *Yokohama-e* prints declined as new subject matters came into fashion, in particular representations of the more obvious outward signs of the country's drive to modernisation such as metal truss bridges, steam trains, and Western brick architecture.

The 1862 measles epidemic

Mentions of epidemics of smallpox (*hôsô* 痘瘡) and measles (*hashika* 麻疹) appear in Japanese historical documents from the 6th and 7th centuries onwards. Brought across from the Eurasian continent through maritime contacts, these epidemics struck Japan repeatedly throughout its history, increasing considerably after the beginning of the 17th century with the urban densification of the Edo period (1603-1868). Thirteen epidemics occurred between 1607 and 1868, the deadliest being that of 1862 when some 240'000 victims were recorded just in the city of Edo (Tôkyô). It was at this time that the woodblock prints known as *hashika-e*, explicitly devoted to this disease, were first produced.

Printed images associated with specific and transitory events such as earthquakes or epidemics were not intended to be kept for long. Acting as protective talismans, they were stuck on the walls or doors of houses in the hope they would prevent the disease from entering or at least protect its occupants from its worst effects. Aimed at a wide audience, these images were produced at low cost and in large print runs, without any of the special effects which characterised high-quality prints, such as the use of powdered mica, colour gradation, embossing, or overprinting.

The compositions tend to be simple, with groups of figures set on a neutral ground, accompanied by one or several blocks of text. Image and text relate to different aspects of the epidemic and thus convey complementary messages. The contents of the texts do not necessarily constitute a comment on the image, nor provide an identification of the figures represented. In addition to their protective function, *hashika-e* had an educational aim, spreading among the population some basic knowledge of the symptoms of the disease, as well as certain therapeutic and preventive measures in the form of dietary or behavioural recommendations and prohibitions. They also expressed the frustration felt by the population at its own powerlessness – as well as that of the authorities – in stemming the progress of the epidemic and in providing effective treatment for those affected. Together, text and image represent all the human, social, and economic consequences of a serious health crisis, consequences that still resonate today.

Tsukioka Yoshitoshi 月岡芳年 (1839-1892)

Born in Edo in 1839, Yoshitoshi joined the print workshop of Utagawa Kuniyoshi 歌川國芳 (1797-1861) at eleven years old. During his long apprenticeship there, he learned to work in his master's style and to become proficient in the subject matter of the Utagawa school, in particular actor portraits and historical subjects. His first known dated print was produced in 1853, but it was not until 1864-1869 that he received regular orders for series and triptychs. Between 1873 and 1882, he embarked on the production of prints for newspapers as well as book illustrations, which provided him with a stable income. His greatest works date from the last part of his career, in particular his two most famous series, *One Hundred Aspects of the Moon* (*Tsuki hyakushi* 月百姿) and *New Forms of Thirty-Six Ghosts* (*Shinkei sanjûrokkaisen* 新形三十六怪撰). Yoshitoshi died in Tôkyô in 1892, at the age of fifty-three.

Recognised as one of the greatest innovators of the *ukiyo-e* print tradition, Yoshitoshi is also one of its most controversial figures. His reputation has sometimes been that of a disturbed artist producing violent and bloody compositions, prints which have led to speculations about his mental health. Though he does seem to have suffered several serious crises during his life, due in part to extreme material hardship, it should however be remembered that his so-called "bloody" prints, produced mainly between 1866 and 1868, only constitute a fraction of his entire work which amounts to over 2400 designs, sixty illustrated books and several dozen paintings.

Yoshitoshi belonged to the last generation of print designers having served an apprenticeship in a workshop of the Edo period. Living at a time of radical social and political changes, he stayed deeply attached to certain traditional artistic and literary values while remaining open to ideas from outside, never hesitating to use new techniques in representing the subject matter inherited from his predecessors, with his own personal twist. His work does not therefore mark the end of a tradition, but rather another stage in the history of the Japanese print, a history which has been one of consistent renewal since it began in the 17th century.

USEFUL INFORMATION

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Dates	25 May – 24 July 2022
Address	Baur Foundation, Museum of Far Eastern Art Rue Munier-Romilly 8 1206 Genève – Suisse +41 22 704 32 82 www.fondation-baur.ch musee@fondationbaur.ch
Opening times	Open from Tuesday to Sunday from 2 pm to 6 pm (closed Mondays), until 8 pm when guided visits are held (see below)
Tickets	Full CHF 15.- Unemployed, disabled people and students CHF 10.-
Press contact	Leyla Caragnano, communication@fondationbaur.ch +41 79 220 56 25
Cultural Mediation	Marie Wyss, mediation@fondationbaur.ch
Public guided visits	Wednesdays, 6.30 pm 1 st , 15, 29 June 2022 6 July 2022
Private guided visits	Reservation required musee@fondationbaur.ch