KABUKI: The Drama of Japanese Prints

April 19–June 22, 2003, Mayer Gallery

From the famed Edward Burr Van Vleck Collection of Japanese Prints comes a selection of prints of kabuki actors and plays. By such artists as Katsukawa Shunko (1743–1812), Torii Kiyotsune (fl. 1757–1779), Hosoda Eishi (1756–1829), Utagawa Toyokuni (1769–1825), and Natori Shunsen (1886–1960), these popular prints were made between 1750 and 1930. This exhibition shows the transformation of prints as they address the challenge of keeping up with the elaborate spectacle of kabuki. Printmakers adding ever-more color, detail, action, and nuance to their depictions of kabuki. Many of the basic qualities that we associate with Japanese prints, their colorful palettes, their diagonal compositions, and their use of dramatic close-ups, first appear as techniques in the escalating battle between artists making images of kabuki in a very competitive market.

In Japan, kabuki theater and the color woodblock print are closely bound together. Both kabuki and woodblock prints were popular entertainment, looked down on by aficionados of higher-class theater and art such as noh and ink painting. In addition, just as actors and their roles provided a constant source of subject matter for prints, prints reciprocated by commemorating important actors and roles, making them still better known.

The spectacle of kabuki was part of *ukiyo* the “floating world” of pleasures that gives the prints of the time the name *ukiyo-e* or “pictures of the floating world.” Actors had such a devoted fan base that they influenced the style of the townspeople of Edo (present-day Tokyo). For instance although all actors were men, even the actors of female roles, the fashions and mannerism presented on stage became models for the women of the city, in the same way that actresses today set styles. As a result, prints often show these male actors not as men playing female parts but embodiments of femininity.

Kabuki and print audiences could identify the actors by their crests, or *mons*, which were incorporated into their costumes, an important detail when an actor's face may be hidden by a thick layer of makeup. With the actors identified as often by their *mons* as by their miens, we can still compare actors’ appearances in various roles. For instance Ichikawa Danjuro, known for his martial

roles, also played female roles, and the prints give a sense of how he looked in these parts.

Actors, like printmakers, often strove to inherit the name and style of their teachers; thus, as there are four generations of Hiroshiges (printmakers), there are seven generations of Ichikawa Danjuros (actors). We have no strong reason to believe that the man who inherited a name was related in any way to the nominal predecessor. Most commonly the namesake was the most preferred of the master apprentices. Just as Hiroshige II so mastered the landscape style of Hiroshige I that his compositions unmistakably continue the stylistic bloodline, so an actor who inherits a particular name is expected to continue to present the same roles in a style only minimally different from his forebear.

The Elvehjem Museum of Art is open Tuesdays-Fridays 9-5 pm; Saturdays and Sundays 11-5 pm; closed Mondays and major holidays. Admission to galleries and educational events is free. The museum is located at 800 University Avenue on the campus of the University of Wisconsin-Madison and is accessible to wheelchairs from the Murray Street (north) entrance. Parking is available at the city of MadisonÕs Lake Street and Frances Street ramps, university lot 46 on Lake Street between Johnson and University Avenue, university lot 47 on Johnson Street between Park and Lake streets. Evening and weekend parking is also available under Grainger Hall with entrance on Brooks Street between University Avenue and Johnson streets. The Elvehjem Museum of Art will provide sign language interpreters for associated programs by three-week advance request to Anne Lambert, Curator of Education, weekdays, 608 263-4421 (voice).

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