

Japanese culture: art, history and society



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The Japanese culture is one that is rich within an historical and traditional context. Many of the traditional practices established hundreds of years ago can be seen today in modern Japan and are a direct reflection of significant historical accounts. The role of woodblock art in Japanese culture is one such reflection to which many historical references and traditions were recorded and captured in pictorial form.

The art of woodblock printing first appeared as early as the 1600's within the cities of Kyoto and Osaka. These early forms of woodblock printing (spoken as Ukiyo-e in the Japanese native tongue) were a very simplistic process utilizing black ink and colored chalk. Typically during this initial time period, the art form was considered a lower class of art and therefore was not sought after by the higher class.

Over time the woodblock printing process became more complex with the introduction of various colors by the artist. For this reason the art form became a group effort of artist, wood block carver, printer, and publisher. The popularity of the townsmen woodblock printing began to take root over the centuries as it migrated from the smaller villages to the city of Edo at its pinnacle during the nineteenth century.

Revered as the classical era of Ukiyo-e, the Edo period spanned from early seventeenth century until its recorded end in 1868. The Japanese experienced a great deal of peace during this span of time under the rule of the Tokugawa Clan. This era of peace however, came with a great deal of political oppression and complete seclusion from the world outside its shores.

The city of Edo began to flourish culturally as the lower class indulged in knowing pleasures and theater performances. The concentration of cultural activity within Edo had given way to new subjects and perspective within woodblock printing artwork. The long practiced subject of woodblock printing had shifted from landscape etchings to more contemporary settings of the city life. What had originally been a century old technique for copying text, the woodblock prints became a highly sought after commodity to visitors of Edo. The printing technique had evolved into a sophisticated practice, depicting landscapes, inner city dwellings, actors, actresses and performers during the seventeenth century.

There are a myriad of woodblock prints linking to historical and contemporary events during the Edo period. One such print is the, “Furyu – The Great Battle of the Frogs,” commissioned in 1864 by Kyosai. This print depicts two large forces of frogs engaged in battle across a narrow body of water. The severed heads of the slain enemy can be seen impaled on stakes as the opposing forces wage a vicious battle. This print is believed by some to represent a playful rendition of the Tokugawa clan fighting the Choshu forces. The exact interpretation of the artwork remains unknown, however, prints that may have shown a negative view towards the Tokugawa clan were oppressed and the artist imprisoned.

The Tokugawa clan was dissolved in 1868 and the emperor was restored as the ruling authority in what began to be known as the Meiji Era. Political oppression continued into the new era as government officials regulated any publications that did promote national peace and the sanctity of the country. There is evidence to suggest that a strong conviction to suppress mockery

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and disapproval from the common wealth continued as late as the nineteenth century.

The printmaker Kyosai and other citizens of Edo may not have perceived this turn of the tide in leadership of the country as a blessing. The economy of Edo had suffered greatly during this transition of power between the Tokugawa rule and the new Meiji era. A new slogan, “Fukoku kyohei,” was formulated under the emperor. The objective was to develop far reaching policies to transform society in an effort to catch up with the west. The dramatic changes that took place are well represented in the woodblock prints that were produced during this time frame.

Once more, the Meiji Period had opened the shores of its country to commerce and trade among the rest of the world. Over the next three decades the popularity of woodblock prints as a commercial item had lost its appeal among the Japanese citizens; however it did remain the prevailing technology routinely used to print pictures and texts within books. A centuries old tradition of perfected woodblock printing that had captured the very essence of Japanese culture had come under pressure from western ideals and influences. An influx of western technologies such as photography, lithographs and other metal type processes quickly gained a foothold over the traditional methodologies of woodblock printing.

Publishers, despite adopting metal type technology, continued to commission woodblock prints for supplements in newspapers and other illustrations. In 1894 publishers were confronted with the task of rallying open support from citizens for the war with China, and in an instance

reverted from the new metal type print processes to the traditional woodblock methodology in production runs. The publishers recognized that woodblock prints in the style of ukiyo-e were their most influential means for gaining public attention. Many artists such as Kobayashi Kiyochika and Mizuno Toshikata, contributed to the attention of the war by creating more than three thousand prints. Over one hundred thousand of the more popular prints were sold during the war.

As the zeal for the China War ended, numerous artist and craftsmen found that their services were no longer needed. The war prints were no longer a sought after commodity. Although sales of the popular prints diminished in time among widely used metal type printing technology, the widespread use of woodblock printing had left a lasting impression within Japanese tradition.

In the brief years following the China War woodblock prints were still commissioned in the use for the reproduction of paintings and ukiyo-e for export. During this time, however, the birth of a new creative print movement was taking root. An artist by the name of Yamamotot Kanae had the revolutionary vision to create a print which utilized traditional woodblock methods. The now famous print entitled, “ Fisherman” had attracted the attention of a new breed of artist.

The new theory of the Sosaku Hanga movement defined what an artist should be at the turn of the early twentieth century. In the traditional role of ukiyo-e printmaking the processes were completed separately and meant that the design, wood carving and printing (publishing) of the woodblock prints were completed by highly skilled individuals. The Sosaku Hanga artist

held the opposing view that the artist should be involved at every step of the process to the prints completion. The Sosaku Hanga movement and other developing art theories around that time period, which utilized woodblocks as their median for new age expressions, never became as popular as the traditional commercialized prints had become in centuries past.