

Graphic Heroes, Magic Monsters: Japanese Prints by Utagawa Kuniyoshi from the Arthur R. Miller Collection

Related Background Information for Educators

Introduction

The 19th-century Japanese printmaker Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1797-1861) was a bold graphic storyteller and a brave commentator on his era, the Edo period (also known as the Tokugawa period).

Celebrated especially among his fellow townspeople, called *chonin*, as well as the samurai, Kuniyoshi provided the public with beautifully rendered, fantastic images rich with recognizable literary allusions and cleverly veiled commentary on contemporary governmental policies and past historical events. Today, in the digital era, journalists and curators refer to Kuniyoshi as “the godfather of manga” for his highly innovative and artistically influential contributions to the world of visual narrative culture.

Many genres of woodblock prints made in the Edo period are often referred to as *ukiyo-e*, “pictures of the floating world.” Prior to the 17th century the word *ukiyo* was used mostly in the context of Buddhism to describe the illusory and ephemeral qualities of the material world and the nature of human existence. In Kuniyoshi’s time the art form of *ukiyo-e* often displayed dramatic, fashionable, and or escapist images of sensual pleasure and aesthetic delight. Unlike paintings, which were costly and produced for an elite audience, *ukiyo-e* themes reflected *chonin* tastes, manners and interests. Ubiquitous and affordable, these mass-produced prints were one of the major modes of expression and communication in the Edo period.

Primarily known for his commanding and impressive depictions of warriors, Kuniyoshi captured the zeitgeist of the late Edo period through his artwork and gave expression and perhaps relief to a society’s anxiety regarding a perceived imminent foreign invasion. This tension arose from an awareness of the presence of Russian, British and American ships periodically sighted off the coast of Japan. Images of brave heroes raised public morale with themes of unwavering strength, courage and loyalty evocative of a heroic past and suggestive of continued formidable Japanese spirit. The foreign threat coincided with the years immediately surrounding the height of Kuniyoshi’s artistic production, 1842-46.

Also highly skillful with comic subjects, Kuniyoshi, a cat lover and pun maker, helped develop a whimsical

genre of prints called “crazy pictures,” some of which were intended to represent well-known phrases and sayings. He has sometimes been described as a “street artist” and met his ordinary patrons where they lived with themes and subjects they craved—beautiful women, landscapes and theater.

In the 1840s, after the enactment of the Tenpo Reforms (a broad category of civil restrictions related to luxury goods and conduct), depictions of kabuki actors, female geisha, courtesans and scenes of theatrical subjects were banned. Kuniyoshi responded with images containing coded critiques of the government, which, although faithful to the letter of the law, flouted its spirit. Called “riddle pictures,” their subjects were often ostensibly mythological figures or warriors from the distant past, but in fact were stand-ins for current rulers and contemporary circumstances. Characters and scenes were sufficiently ambiguous both to meet the censor’s approval and to provoke debate among patrons about the precise nature of their meaning.

Historical Context

A complex period, Edo cannot be adequately summed up in a few paragraphs. The following is a simple overview intended to be a starting point for educators interested in teaching about Utagawa Kuniyoshi in the context of his time. For a broader overview of the period please read: http://aboutjapan.japansociety.org/content.cfm/the_polity_of_the_tokugawa_era_1

In this period, shoguns (military dictators who ruled in the name of the emperor) governed and Japan enjoyed nearly 250 years of peace.

From about 1639 through the early 1800s the shogun’s government, called the shogunate, adopted a policy of relative national seclusion to preserve their hegemony. Contact with the outside world was limited to Dutch traders and Chinese and Korean missions.¹

A variety of European (primarily Dutch) travel, science and anatomy books trickled in through the port of Nagasaki. Kuniyoshi was known to have owned several hundred Western images, which he referenced and occasionally borrowed from liberally in his compositions.²

The Tokugawa Shogunate held approximately one-

quarter of the agricultural land as well as important mining sites throughout the country. The shogunate also was administrator of the major cities: Kyoto, Osaka and Nagasaki. The remainder of the country was divided into domains called *han*, theoretically ruled autonomously by private landowners called *daimyo*.

In order to maintain a strategic advantage over the *daimyo* the shogunate imposed severe restrictions on personal freedom and dictated general rules of conduct. The regulation with arguably the deepest impact was the "alternate attendance" system, which required the *daimyo* to spend approximately half their time in attendance at the shogunal court in Edo and leave their wives and children behind whenever they returned to their domains. This policy effectively discouraged sedition and produced heavy financial burdens on the *daimyo*.

The civil and military administration of the *daimyo* domains were staffed by the samurai. In peacetime, many samurai became bureaucrats. Some focused their energies on cultural learning and artistic avocations. *Bushido*, "the cult of the warrior," became formalized, promulgating an idealized code of behavior that focused on fidelity to one's lord and honor.³

The relationship between the idealized code of honor and the reality of life in the Edo period is a subject of scholarly dispute.

By the 19th century, most Japanese families were participating in an urban-based commercial economy. Castle towns, originally conceived of as defensive enclaves by *daimyo* interested in consolidating their domains, ultimately became the largest cities in the country. Cities were transformed into highly commercial zones populated primarily by artisans and merchants producing and trafficking goods respectively.

Tokugawa society was divided by law into four classes: samurai, peasants, artisans and merchants. Although considered socially lowly, many artisans and merchants (known as *chonin* or townspeople) profited most from the economic growth of the era because as commercialists they had the ability to adjust to economic fluctuations. Many peasants and samurai dependent on agriculturally generated income suffered declines in income as the result of inflation.

Economically empowered townspeople enjoyed and helped develop their own distinct popular culture: *ukiyo-e*, kabuki theater, *rakugo* and *ningyo joruri*, better known today as *bunraku*.

Short Biography

As an artist, Kuniyoshi came of age in a particularly vibrant and colorful moment in Japanese history, the final decades of the Edo period, (1603-1868). He was born on January 1, 1798, in the heart of the commercial district in Edo, (modern day Tokyo), then the largest city in the world. Home to writers, artists, intellectuals, publishers and scholars, Edo provided a rich source of inspiration and opportunity for a member of the artisan class. Surrounded by many literate countrymen in the cultural center of Japan, he had a natural and responsive market.

The son of a silk dyer, Kuniyoshi demonstrated an artistic aptitude early on and taught himself to draw by copying illustrations in books by well-known artists of the day, Kitao Masayoshi and Kitao Shigemasa.

Around the age of 11 he gained the attention of Utagawa Toyokuni I, the master of the largest and most influential *ukiyo-e* school and shortly thereafter was accepted into his studio. Toyokuni gave him, as was the tradition, his artistic name, Kuniyoshi, a combination of *kuni* from the end of the master's name and the beginning of his own given name, Yoshisaburo.

Kuniyoshi trained in theatrical portraiture, (Toyokuni's guidelines became the standard for 19th-century actor portraiture) and his earliest prints depict contemporary kabuki productions. But a lack of commissions and failure to distinguish himself among the other Utagawa studio artists made earning a living difficult. It was not until 1827, with the production of his first print series entitled *One of the 108 Heroes of the Popular Water Margin* that he launched his career and ultimately established himself as a master of *musha-e* (warrior pictures), a niche genre within the fiercely competitive world of popular print-making.

Footnotes

1. The classic English language introduction to Japan's relations with the outside world during this era is: Toby, Ronald. "Reopening the Question of Sakoku: Diplomacy in the Legitimation of the Tokugawa Bakufu," *Journal of Japanese Studies*, 3, 2 (Summer, 1977): pp. 323-64.
2. Clark, Timothy. *Kuniyoshi From The Arthur R. Miller Collection*. London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2009. p. 23.
3. Department of Asian Art. "Samurai." In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000-. http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/samu/hd_samu.htm (October 2002)

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