

Becoming Modern, Becoming Global: Japanese Prints from the Meiji Period (1868-1912)

In 1868 the Tokugawa military rulers were overthrown by supporters of Emperor Meiji (whose name means “enlightened rule”), marking the end of the Edo period and ushering in a new era of Japanese government. The restoration of the emperor brought centuries of leadership by feudal military lords to an end and set in motion a series of sweeping changes in the Japanese political system. The Meiji period brought practical power of rule back to the emperor but also led to the establishment of a new form of representational government. Meiji-period reforms introduced a constitutional system whereby the rights and powers of hereditary lords were severely limited, new standardized tax laws established, and a host of other measures directed toward the modernization of the country enacted. The Meiji restoration also marked the beginning of a new level of engagement with other nations. For centuries, Japan had operated under a strict isolationist policy, which came to an end just prior to the Meiji period. The impact of global interaction would become a crucial storyline throughout the new era.

By the beginning of the Meiji period, print culture in Japanese cities had been flourishing for well over a century. Pre-Meiji prints feature brightly colored images of actors, courtesans, and scenic views, but the Meiji period’s dramatic social, political, and cultural changes provided a wealth of new subjects for printmakers to capture. This installation presents three groups of Meiji prints—focusing on foreign customs and styles, global warfare, and the modern print—that vividly capture the transformation of Japan.

Zoe S. Kwok
Assistant Curator of Asian Art

Foreign Customs and Styles *(North Wall)*

The single-sheet prints in this group reveal a growing interest in foreigners as well as their dress, habits, and practices. The distinctly Japanese appearance of some of the figures, along with the rather fanciful interpretations of the activities portrayed, reflects the complication that arose when printmakers were faced with a demand for foreign subjects with which they were unfamiliar. Interest in foreigners also was reflected in the realm of theater. The print *The Strange Tale of the Castaways* illustrates a moment in a play of the same title when the protagonist—a young Japanese fisherman who is rescued at sea after his boat sinks and then taken to San Francisco—is captured by Native Americans during his journey across North America.

Also on display in this group are two prints depicting the famous Gankiro teahouse in Yokohama, one of the few port cities open to foreigners. The Gankiro was permitted to admit non-Japanese patrons, hence its inclusion in the illustrated book *Picturesque World or Scenes in Many Lands*, published in Boston in 1878. This print, with its West-viewing-East vantage point, is a wonderful counterpart to *Interior of the Gankirō Tea House*, which presents the same scene from the Japanese artist's perspective. Both prints depict the “butterfly dance,” a performance by fan-wielding female dancers. The title of Puccini's 1904 opera, *Madame Butterfly*, probably is a loose reference to this dance.



Japanese

Meiji period, 1868–1912

Anonymous

William Lee: England, ca. 1890

Woodblock print (ōban tate-e format); ink and color on paper

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Jerome Straka (x1983-79)



Japanese

Meiji period, 1868–1912

Anonymous

Heathcoat: England, ca. 1890

Woodblock print (ōban tate-e format); ink and color on paper

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Jerome Straka (x1983-80)



Japanese

Meiji period, 1868–1912

Anonymous

Dyer, ca. 1890

Woodblock print (ōban tate-e format); ink and color on paper
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Jerome Straka(x1983-81)



Japanese

Meiji period, 1868–1912

Anonymous

Wedgwood: England, ca. 1890

Woodblock print (ōban tate-e format); ink and color on paper
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Jerome Straka(x1983-83)



Japanese

Edo period, 1600–1868

Utagawa Yoshikazu (Ichijusai), active 1850s–1860s

Hollanders (Oranda), 1861

Woodblock print (ōban tate-e format); ink and color on paper
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Jerome Straka(x1983-77)



Japanese

Edo period, 1600–1868

Utagawa Yoshikazu (Ichijusai), active 1850s–1860s

Banquet of Foreigners from the Five Countries, 1861

Woodblock print (ōban tate-e format); ink and color on paper
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Jerome Straka(x1983-78)



Japanese

Edo period, 1600–1868

Utagawa Yoshikazu (Ichijusai), active 1850s–1860s

Foreigners Showing Affection for Children, 1860

Woodblock print (ōban tate-e format); ink and color on paper
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Jerome Straka(x1983-76)



Japanese

Meiji period, 1868–1912

Adachi Ginkō, active 1874–1897

The Strange Tale of the Castaways: a Western Kabuki (Hyōryū kidon yōkabuki), 1879

Woodblock print (ōban tate-e format); ink and color on paper
Museum purchase, Anne van Biema Collection Fund (2006-33)



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Published by: Estes & Lauriat

Butterfly Ballet in a Theatre in Yeddo, from the illustrated book ***Picturesque World or Scenes in Many Lands***, 1878

Wood engraving on gray paper

Anonymous gift (2006-63)



Japanese

Meiji period, 1868–1912

Utagawa Kunisada, 1786–1865

and **Hashimoto Sadahide**, 1807–1873

Interior of the Gankirō Tea House (Butterfly Opera), 1861

Woodblock print (ōban tate-e triptych); ink and color on paper

Museum purchase, Anne van Biema Collection Fund (2006-61a-c)



Japanese

Meiji period, 1868–1912

Toyohara Chikanobu 豊原延周, 1838–1912

Nobility Taking in the Evening Cool, 1887

Woodblock print (ōban tate-e triptych); ink and color on paper

Museum purchase, Anne van Biema Collection Fund (2006-62 a-c)

Global Warfare (*South and East Wall*)

One major result of Japan's entry onto the global stage during the Meiji period was the creation of a modern military. The need to rapidly develop a military capable of engaging with other international powers was made clear in 1854-55, when an American flotilla led by Commodore Matthew Perry forced Japan to open ports to foreigners. *American Steam Boat* is an early depiction of American naval abilities, to which the Meiji government responded by building munitions factories and instituting mandatory military service for every able-bodied male. Prussian-style military dress also became the preferred uniform for government officials, as is shown in *The Signing of the Meiji Constitution*. Japan's new military faced its first serious test in the Sino-Japanese War (1894-95), and China's defeat is captured in *Admiral Ding Ruchang of the Chinese Beiyang Fleet, Totally Destroyed at Weihaiwei, Commits Suicide at His Official Residence*. Victory in that war soon was followed by victory in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05, depicted in *The Humane Great Japanese Red Cross Medical Corps Tending to the Injured in the Russo Japanese War*. The majestically sized *Picture of the Great Naval Battle of the Port of Lushun [Port Arthur]* also portrays a scene from the Russo-Japanese War.



Japanese

Meiji period, 1868–1912

Adachi Ginkō, active 1874–1897

The Signing of the Meiji Constitution, 1878

Woodblock print (ōban tate-e triptych); ink and color on paper

Allen R. Adler, Class of 1967, Japanese Print Collection (2008-93 a-c)



Japanese

Meiji period, 1868–1912

Mizuno Toshikata

Admiral Ding Ruchang of the Chinese Beiyang Fleet, Totally Destroyed at Weihaiwei, Commits Suicide at His Official Residence

Woodblock print (ōban tate-e triptych); ink and color on paper

Allen R. Adler, Class of 1967, Japanese Print Collection (2008-134 a-c)



Japanese

Meiji period, 1868–1912

Gakyōjin, dates unknown

Published by Naraha Sannosuke

The Humane Great Japanese Red Cross Medical Corps Tending to the Injured in the Russo Japanese War, 1904

Woodblock print (ōban tate-e triptych); ink and color on paper

Allen R. Adler, Class of 1967, Japanese Print Collection (2008-100 a-c)



Japanese

Edo period, 1600–1868

Utawaga Yoshikazu (Ichijusai), active 1850s–1860s

Published by Maruya Jinpachi (Marujin, Enjud?)

American Steam Boat, ca. 1861

Woodblock print (ōban tate-e triptych); ink and color on paper

Museum purchase, Anne van Biema Collection Fund (2011-163 a-c)



Japanese

Meiji period, 1868–1912

Ōkura Kōtō, dates unknown

Picture of the Great Naval Battle of the Port of Lushun [Port Arthur], 1904

Woodblock print (ōban tate-e hexptych); ink and color on paper

Museum purchase, Anne van Biema Collection Fund (2006-60 a-f)

The Modern Print (*South Wall*)

The final section of this installation displays four prints by the artist Kobayashi Kiyochika (1847-1915), often heralded as the first modern print artist in Japan. Kiyochika was self-taught as an artist, and his style was heavily influenced by Western prints, which were widely available in Meiji-period Tokyo. He eschewed the colorful and often chaotic city scenes that were the hallmark of traditional printmakers, focusing instead on the depiction of contemplative twilight or night scenes. His prints emphasize shadows and outlines, sometimes punctuated by bright spots of artificial light. Ever-inventive, Kiyochika drew on visual elements found in photography, oil paintings, and copperplate printing to create a new print aesthetic fit for a modern Japan.



Japanese

Meiji period, 1868–1912

Kobayashi Kiyochika 小林清親, 1847–1915

Fireworks at Ike-no-hata, 1881

Woodblock print; ink and color on paper

Museum purchase, the Anne van Biema Collection Fund (2010-234)



Japanese

Meiji period, 1868–1912

Kobayashi Kiyochika 小林清親, 1847–1915

Published by Matsuki Heikichi

Storm at Ocha-no-mizu Bridge, ca. 1915

Woodblock print (ōban yoko-e format); ink and color on paper

Museum purchase, the Anne van Biema Collection Fund (2011-12)



Japanese

Meiji period, 1868–1912

Kobayashi Kiyochika 小林清親, 1847–1915

Summer Moon at Imato, 1881

Woodblock print; ink and color on paper

Museum purchase, the Anne van Biema Collection Fund (2010-235)



Japanese

Meiji period, 1868–1912

Kobayashi Kiyochika 小林清親, 1847–1915

Published by Matsuki Heikichi

Night Scene at Hakone, ca. 1915

Woodblock print (ōban yoko-e format); ink and color on paper

Museum purchase, the Anne van Biema Collection Fund (2011-13)