

Japanese Woodblock Prints: Artists, Publishers and Masterworks 1680-1900

Andreas Marks

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Perhaps, hundreds of years from now, *People* magazine cover images of Brad and Angelina will be collected in books as beautiful as this one. Maybe a particular image—say, of the couple cooing over their twins—will become an icon, printed on posters, playing cards, and screensavers, much as Hokusai's woodcut of the Great Wave is today.

Though they are now collected and prized as art, traditional Japanese woodblock prints were originally a commercial enterprise. They were produced by a team of artists with the publisher at the center and featured subjects of interest to the general population, such as kabuki actors and beautiful courtesans. These prints are now known as ukiyo-e, pictures of ukiyo or the “floating world.” This Buddhist term originally described the ephemeral nature of human existence, but came to be used to refer to the world of theater and other entertainments. Woodblock prints, first sold as individual prints to commemorate artistic performances or illustrate books, developed into a thriving industry that stretched over two centuries, reaching its peak in the 1840s and 1850s.

In *Japanese Woodblock Prints*, Andreas Marks has collected the work of fifty artists and forty-nine publishers, covering Kiyonobu (1664-1729) to Kokunimasa (1874-1944). For each, he provides a brief but thorough description of what is known about each artist or publisher and his style and includes several representative prints. For publishers, he also includes a list of prints and artists. Marks' work makes it clear that the publisher was key to the art form—as catalyst, organizer, and producer of the prints. Publishers kept an eye on current trends; oversaw teams of artists, engravers, and printers; owned the woodblocks and copyrights; and even, at one point, served as censors in an “unsuccessful attempt by the government to self-regulate the vibrant market.”

A lengthy introduction explains the history and context of prints and their production. The apprenticeship system for artists, how prints were financed, different kinds of prints (single, series, fan, and pillar prints), the advent of multi-color printing in 1765, and the elaborate Japanese naming systems for artists and publishers are all addressed. The various market segments to which Marks refers—actors, beauties, landscapes, legends, and interest in foreign people and things—are readily apparent in the choice of prints. A bibliography and detailed index round out the collection.

The meticulous organization of information notwithstanding, it is the prints which are the chief pleasure of the book: 523 prints that bring to life a Japan of heroic tales, beautiful women, ghosts, warriors, demons, and spring cherry blossoms. The exuberance of color, motion, and expression, all carefully arranged, make this a book for scholars and browsers, serious collectors and hedonists alike.

TERESA SCOLLON (July / August 2010)

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