

Ukiyo-e and the Edo Period

Ukiyo-e, literally translated to “pictures of the floating world,” is a Japanese art form that flourished during the Edo period (1603 – 1867). The Edo period marked drastic social, political, and economic change in Japan as the country was brought under the military control of the Tokugawa shogunate. The shogunate brought peace and prosperity by ending an era of civil war and by creating a strong economy in which agricultural production was emphasized and commerce was expanded.

The new regime reordered the social structure, dividing citizens into four classes, between which mobility was forbidden. At the top of the system were the samurai warriors, below them were the farmers, then artisans, and finally, the merchants. The aristocratic class, made up of the ruling family and his *daimyos*, or regional lords, lived outside of this new system. The ranking of these classes was based not on wealth, but on a Confucian ethic that prized contribution to society and what philosophers described as “moral purity.” Samurai protected the people, farmers grew the food that fed the people, and artisans created the tools and products used by the people, but because the merchants created nothing and lived off of the exchange of goods, they were relegated to the lowest social rank. Ironically, however, because of the new economic boom, the merchant class also became the richest class. The shogun found the lower classes distasteful and morally impure and passed anti-*chōnin* (townsmen of the merchant and artisan classes) laws that strictly regulated how the *chōnin* could spend their money, dress, where they could live, and the quality of goods they were allowed to purchase.

As expected, the unfair restrictions created tension and fostered resentment toward the ruling class. In order to prevent a revolt, the shogun authorized the creation of Edo’s pleasure district, known as the Yoshiwara, in 1617. The Yoshiwara was a small, walled section outside of the city, only accessible down a long road or by boat. It was in the Yoshiwara that the courtesans lived and worked, *kabuki* theatre was performed, and the lower classes could show off their wealth and engaged in decadent activities otherwise banned in conservative Japanese society. This new urban culture came to be known as “the floating world,” a term which described the new hedonistic lifestyle of attending *kabuki* plays, patronizing brothels, and frequenting the Yoshiwara. The floating world brought happiness to citizens suffering under the new class system of the shogunate, and it reflected the sentiment that life is transitory and to indulge in life’s earthly pleasures was the proper way of life.

The *ukiyo-e* art form emerged within this new floating world. Artists depicted a range of subjects, including samurai warriors, *kabuki* actors, folklore, literary scenes, landscapes and travel series, and historical events. But, no genre was ever as popular or well-represented as the *bijinga* (pictures of beautiful women). The image of the *bijin* (beautiful woman) was the feminine ideal, and these beauties were passive, attentive, and demure. Looking beyond their obvious beauty, these *bijinga* can give us some insight into the treatment and social standing of women in an age where societal pressures were significant and the government was oppressive. While *ukiyo-e* artists gave us a perfect version of these women, their realities were often very harsh. More than sixty works from the Reading Public Museum help to tell the story of these women, from all walks of Japanese society, united in their struggle against the status quo.

Making a Woodblock Print

The dynamic new urban culture of the floating world led to the celebration of new art forms, including *ukiyo-e*, which was popular among the *chōnin* (townsmen), and centered on the Yoshiwara. *Ukiyo-e* artists most commonly produced their work in the form of woodblock prints, which were inexpensive to create, cheap to purchase, and lent itself to producing large quantities of each image. The production team for a woodblock print was comprised of four individuals: the artist, who designed the image to be printed; the engraver, who would carve the image onto the block of wood; the printer, who inked and printed the image; and the publisher, who marketed the images and commissioned reprints when a print or series was successful.

When the artist finished drawing his design on paper, an exact copy was made and placed face down on a block of cherry wood. The engraver would then trace the image onto the block through the paper, destroying it. This first block was known as the key block and contained only the outlines of the image and none of the finer details. This key block was then passed to the printer who made a number of black and white prints. These prints were then used to carve additional blocks, one for each color that would be used in the final image. These were known as key block proofs and contained registration marks, which allowed the printer to place the paper perfectly so that the image was properly aligned every time a new color was added. After a few samples were drafted, and a final consultation with the artist determined the exact pigments and shades to be used, the images were printed by the printer and marketed and sold by the publisher.

In the pre-modern era, these woodblocks were extremely valuable to publishers, and served as the copyright to an image. As long as the woodblock survived, popular prints could be reprinted and sold as many times as necessary. There is no way to know for sure how many copies of each print were made, but there is evidence to suggest that two hundred was the usual number for the first print run. Many prints had a few editions, and if they were extremely popular like those of Hiroshige and Hokusai (both represented in this exhibition), they could have as many as twenty editions. The number of prints and editions was ultimately decided by the publisher, as he was the one who commissioned the prints based on demand and other economic factors.

Women in Edo Society

The matriarchal society of ancient Japan regarded women with great respect and reverence. Women served as head of the household, were spiritual leaders, and female rulers were not only accepted but celebrated for their ability to bring peace and stability to their domain. The Shinto sun goddess Amaterasu was a prominent deity in the Japanese pantheon who was embraced and admired for her feminine qualities. But, with the introduction of Chinese Buddhism in 552, attitudes towards women shifted immensely. This form of Buddhism was extremely anti-feminine, and held the conviction that women were inherently evil. It was thought that only men could achieve salvation, and that women were agents of the devil who sought to distract men from their path to enlightenment. When the Tokugawa shogunate seized control of Japan, it revived the Neo-Confucian ethic that women were inferior to men, and it was this new social order that imposed severe restrictions on women.

Women living under the shogunate did not exist legally and were not allowed to own property. A woman was expected to maintain the Three Obediences: first, to her father as a daughter; to her husband as a wife; and finally, to her sons as a mother. A man was allowed to divorce his wife if she could not produce an heir, and in some instances, a man was permitted to kill his wife if he found her to be lazy. Idleness was not permitted, and even wealthy women with a retinue of servants would work from dawn until dusk.

The Japanese household, known as the *ie*, was a dynamic system that thrived on the efforts of both the husband and the wife. The typical *ie* was made up of the married couple, the husband's parents, and sometimes his unmarried sisters. It was the duty of the male head of household to represent the *ie* to the world by working outside of the *ie*, but it was the female head's job to run the *ie*, supervise the other women, cook, clean, and manage the children. Women were taught to read and write in *hiragana*, the informal script reserved for womanly writing, but were forbidden from learning *kanji*, the more formal script used in business and politics, preventing them from participating in male-dominated disciplines.

Young girls were expected to be obedient and gentle, discreet in their speech, clean and tidy, and industrious in feminine tasks. In addition to their education at home, girls would also attend social groups that offered practical skills and allowed the girls to socialize. Girls would complete their duties in the *ie* during the day and attend these groups at night, where older women in the town would pass on their skills and knowledge. Here young ladies would learn the arts of sewing, flower arranging, the tea ceremony, gift-wrapping, and music.

Onna Daigaku

The *Onna Daigaku* (*The Great Learning for Women*) was a publication by Kaibara Ekken, a Confucian scholar of the late seventeenth century. This ethical text outlined acceptable behaviors for women. The book was widely popular, and was often given as a gift to young brides. While it was written with the intention of dictating female behaviors, it is more likely that this book's principals became a goal to achieve, and were not strictly adhered to in most circumstances. Nevertheless, it gives us a profound look at the behavioral expectations that women were subjected to during the Edo period.

Excerpts from the *Onna Daigaku*:

It is the duty of a girl living in her parents' house to practice filial piety toward her father and mother. But after marriage, her duty is to honor her father-in-law and mother-in-law, to honor them beyond her father and mother, to love and reverence them with all ardor, and to tend them with a practice of filial piety.

A woman has no other lord; she must look to her husband as her lord and must serve him with all worship and reverence, not despising or thinking lightly of him. The Way of the woman is to obey her man...When the husband issues his instructions, the wife must never disobey them. In doubtful cases she should inquire of her husband and obediently follow his commands...A woman should look on her husband as if he were Heaven itself and never weary of thinking how she may yield to him and thus escape celestial castigation.

A woman must always be on the alert and keep a strict watch over her own conduct. In the morning she must rise early and at night go late to rest. Instead of sleeping in the middle of the day, she must be intent on the duties of her household; she must not grow tired of weaving, sewing, and spinning. She must not drink too much tea and wine, nor must she feed her eyes and ears on theatrical performances, ditties, and ballads... In everything she must avoid extravagance, and in regard to both food and clothes, she must act according to her station in life and never give in to luxury and pride.

The five worst infirmities that afflict women are indocility, discontent, slander, jealousy, and silliness. Without any doubt... it is they that cause women to be inferior to men...The worst of them all and the parent of the other four is silliness... as viewed from the standard of a man's nature, a woman's foolishness means that she fails to understand the duties that lie before her very eyes, and she does not recognize the actions that will bring blame on her own head, and she does not comprehend even those things that will bring calamity to her husband and children...Such is the stupidity of her character that it is incumbent on her, in every detail, to distrust herself and obey her husband.