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Reseña de "Strong Women Beautiful Men- Japanese Portrait Prints from the Toledo Museum of Art"
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BOOK REVIEW

Dazzling Beauty and Cosmopolitan Celebrity in Mueller, Laura J.

Strong Women Beautiful Men
– Japanese Portrait Prints from the Toledo Museum of Art
(Toledo-Ohio/Amsterdam, Toledo Museum of Art & Hotei Publishing, 2005)

Japanese portrait prints have always been looked upon by the western world as a magic window open to a geographically and temporally distant exotic world, now that we are living in the 21st century. Prints are not mere impressions but instead true pictures boasting vibrant colours and striking shapes depicting cross-eyed actors and stunning women in deep-rooted and coded times which sort of hypnotise us with precise, meticulous and rather elaborate strokes and a range of fastidiously chosen colours which still, today, transmit life.

This book, a catalogue of the exhibition with the same name (14th October 2005 to 2nd January 2006) recovers a history/a tradition/an enchantment, by the Toledo Museum of Art, through the exhibition of these worldly acknowledged masterpieces. It is in fact commemorating the 75th anniversary of the first exhibition at the Museum ("A Special Exhibition of Modern Japanese Prints" – 1930 with only 20th century prints the Japanese Shin hanga or "new prints", dating back to the beginning of said century, this is, of the contemporary Japanese artists of the time). In 1936 another exhibition "Modern Japanese Prints: Wood-Block Prints by Ten Artists" featured a 5-year retrospective of the Works of: Hakuho, Hasui, Kiyoshi, Kotondo,
Shinsui, Shiro, Shoson, Shunsen, Yoshida and Yoshimitsu and in 1997 the “Yoshida Hiroshi: Master Printmaker” exhibition paid tribute to the work of this Master and extraordinary landscape artist.

The Toledo Museum of Art was able to develop these themes because of its remarkable relation with the Shin hanga publisher and dealer Watanabe Shōzaburō as well as with the renowned master and leader of the same movement Hiroshi Yoshida and his wife Fujio.

All these exhibitions, specially those in the 30’s, were important moments in the disclosure, study and knowledge of the Japanese prints in the USA and within the world museum panorama. The respective publications have featured as valuable work tools in the study of these artists and this graphic art. One must enhance how the growth of this Museum’s Japanese Prints collection has occurred in a such remarkable manner since the first exhibitions. The exhibited prints were destined for sale and art collector Mr. Hubert D. Bennett who bought most of the displayed works, donated his collection to the Museum in 1939.

The 2005 exhibition entitled “Strong Women, Beautiful Men” which led to the current study by Laura J. Mueller (student and scholar of Japanese woodblock prints who is completing her Ph.D. at the University of Wisconsin, Madison; the topic is Entertaining Virtue: The Naturalization of Confucianism in Edo Print Culture. She is also Van Vleck Curatorial Intern at the Elvehjem Museum of Art) exhibits approximately 80 prints which portray 30 centuries of the history of this art. Beauty and Celebrity have been common concepts directly related to the tradition of representing the individual and the human body in Japanese prints. The dialectics of the exhibition is based on the representation of the bijin-ga, beautiful women/beauty, and of the Kabuki/celebrity actors, whose dominant strokes intersect in the adjacent exhibition “I wanna be loved by you: Photographs of Marilyn Monroe” (organised by the Brooklyn Museum of Art) that illustrates the undeniable contemporary feel of the issues raised by the Japanese prints: beauty, celebrity or the representation of the human body. Certainly the communication afforded by the two exhibitions has been an added value for the cultural scope of the Museum’s activities, criss-crossing in a rather interesting manner the worlds that are geographically (western/eastern) and temporally distant but revealing that there can still be various conceptual worries of man who in the end questions influences that transcend all barriers.

Laura J. Mueller presents “The Changing Faces of Japanese Woodblock Prints”, the history of Japanese sketches/printings/prints in a very appealing and consistent manner resorting to a chronological structure which facilitates the understanding of both the technical and thematic evolution of this art. At the same time she carefully leads us to the prints that comprise the
exhibition and, with great quality, the catalogue. In a very intelligent way she blends the scientific contents and the chronological stages highlighting the master artists who stood out in each moment, techniques or styles and who are represented in the exhibition by their unique masterpieces. The Catalogue of plates is inspiring thanks to its clear and precise information and high quality of the copies of the prints whose expressive forms and live colours are quite evident. Brief biographies of the artists in the exhibition and an Exhibition Checklist at the end of the catalogue render value to this exhibition and said catalogue will be the only physical element for future scientific reference and remembrance of this event.

Since the 18th century the technique of sketching has been well-known in the Land of the Rising Sun. But it is at the turn of the 17th century with the so-called “revolution of prints” that this art, which was not seen as such at the time, develops and attains unequal splendour. It is precisely in the 17th century, during the Edo period (1615-1865) that we observe the conditions that originate the development of this growing activity. The Tokugawa Shogunate in an attempt to centralise power calls for the presence of the daimyos (governing class) in Edo (modern-day Tokyo) so as to be close to the Shogun in order to assure power and the supervision of the subordinates. Edo, rapidly becomes a cosmopolitan city with a predominant urban middle class due to the arrival and settlement of the dominant class and its underlings and the increase in the number of officers of the regime that comprise a growing market which in turn triggers the mercantile and artisan activities.

In the 17th century Edo is one of the largest, if not the largest, cities in the world with one million inhabitants. For the history of the prints the development of pleasure and entertainment quarters in the big cities (Shimabara in Kyoto; Shimmachi in Osaka and Yoshiwara in Edo) are going to constitute the so-called “floating world” (in a Buddhist allusion to the ephemeral world highlighting the concepts of permanent evolution, instability or volatility) where restaurants tea-houses, theatres, brothels or lodging houses are evidence of their fancy for luxury, for the pleasures of life and entertainment which are limited to these closed quarters.

The Ukiyo-e “images of the floating world” comprise many themes, such as bijin-ga (beautiful women from geishas, to courtesans, to aristocrats, to maids, irrespective of their status or social role), yakusha-e (kabuki actors), musha-e (warriors) or shunga (erotics) in which the representation of the human, the body, is the fundamental point which is not at all similar to the western concepts of this representation. It is interesting how the clothes, the accessories, the hairdos, the identity marks or the family symbols are much more important elements in the identification of the person or subject portrayed than the physical appearance of the latter when compared to the
original in flesh. Features, such as parody, style, individuality and later physiognomy (the study of facial features) are factors that outline the aesthetic concepts which are unveiled in daily scenes, landscapes, in religious forms and in another depicted iconography.

The industry that encompasses the dynamics of the sketches and its printing develops and comprises distinct areas that complement each other: the paper industry, the sketch, colour and printing technologies, the artists who draw or carve and those who print, the poets and those who trade them. Specialities, such as colour or portrayed themes allow artists to start specialising in certain steps or details of the sketch process.

The evolution of style in human representation in Japanese prints is highly enhanced by Laura J. Mueller, in the 17th century illustrated books (e-iribon) or the image books (ebon) by artists like Hishikawa Moronobu (d. 1694) featuring images of pleasure quarters and erotic scenes illustrating subjects with peculiar, inharmonious bodies, long faces, protuberant genitals and highly elaborate hairdos. Nishikawa Sukenobu (1671-1751) and his representations of the daily life of the courtesans, geishas their behaviour and customs (fuzoku) presents more delicate bodies and faces as well as refined and cared for garments which include accessories and hairdos. The beauty, charm, elegance and sophistication of the bijin-ga is always present.

Torii Kiyonobu (1644-1729) founder of the Torii School specializes, using different techniques and formats, in the famous Kabuki theatre actors. In fact, the popularity of these actors reaches a peak allowing the portraits of the latter to be easily sold as mere illustrations and announcements of shows. The dynamics of the Japanese prints of that time portrayed daily trivial situations of the floating world and its disclosure to the detriment of an artistic vision of said representations. However, according to the Japanese concepts, the mastery and quality of these illustrations make them today true works of art. This way, the fans of the various Kabuki actors with the fame, at national level, of today’s actors could buy prints portraying their idols. As aforementioned the physical features that could produce a reliable portrait of the actor are not appreciated contrary to aspects such as clothes, marks, symbols, texts, accessories or the physical context of the plot and the theatre atmosphere portrayed.

The advent of polychrome printings with resource to to woodblock prints boasting vibrant colours which were then meticulously printed revealing their exceptional quality led to greater demand and popularity. Between 1765 and 1940 over 300 million printings were made, thus assuring the popularity of these images.

Suzuki Harunobu (1724-1770) stands out in this context of colour due to a new tradition in which pictorial calendar prints (egoyomi) are exchanged
during the New Year celebrations featuring new sizes and the interesting androgynous and fresh beauty of man and woman (here called bijin). This art form portrayed beautiful, young subjects of both sexes engaged in various activities, such as playing an instrument and one can only distinguish the gender through small and rather splendid elements such as hairdos or garments (sophistication is quite overwhelming!!).

Katsukawa Shunshō (1726-1792), sets up a school with his own name and discontinues the tradition of the ideal representation of the kabuki actors who were only identified through the aforementioned elements and introduces individualism and likenesses (nigao) in these yakusha nigao-e (images of actors with physical likeness as to those in flesh). His aragoto (or “rough stuff”) illustrations depicting the roles of the most famous heroes and villains featuring in plays of the time portray the grimaces, frowns and other facial expressions that make these kabuki theatre actors famous. The mie (pose of grimaced face and crossed eyes) a fixed and emphatic moment during which the actor crosses his eyes to give the play the appropriate relevance is yet another feature highlighted by this artist.

Yoshikawa Kanpō (1894-1979) : The Actor Jitsukawa Enjaku as Igami no Gonta, Published in 1923 by Satō Shōtarō, Signed: Kanpō with publisher’s seal SatōShō han, Gift of H. D. Bennett, 1939.411.

An example of a large scale portrait (large head print or ōkubi-e) of a Kabuki actor enhancing the facial expression, a sort of a grimace which affords him popularity during a crucial moment in the play, cross-eyed – the mie (the apotheosis and frozen moment).
Kitagawa Utamaro (1753-1806) also a disciple of physical likenesses (nigao) of the subjects portrayed he engages in the study of physiognomy (sōmi or sōgaku), the art of interpreting and comprehending the personality of a person through facial characteristics.


These three beauties of the period, very popular due to their beauty can be identified, in this elegant large head print (ōkubi-e) by small elements/symbols on their garments or on the objects, like the fan. Although this identification is rather evident through the same symbols Utamaro, via the study of the physiognomy affords each model differences, be it in the distance between the eyes, in the shape of the nose, in the place of the ears on the head, according to the real people portrayed affording this type of illustration increasing individualism and realism. The inspiration of the bijin (beautiful women) can therefore put together a picture like this one, in which none of the women have anything in common apart from their beauty: In the portrait: (in the middle) the geisha: Tomimoto Toyohina; (bottom-left) the daughter of the owner of a shop which sells rice cookies: Takashima Ohisa; (bottom-right) a woman who serves at the tea-house Naniwaya: Naniwaya Okita. Utamaro used a precious technique known as kirazuri ou the use of a sparkling mica-dust background to set off the soft matte tones of the subjects’ faces.
Tōshūsai Sharaku, an artist of the same period whose portraits also highlighted the faces and heads of the actors (ōkubi-e) becomes popular when he adds a touch of caricature, humour and even some grotesque strokes. This led to many artists depicting imaginary elements in prints affording them a satirical, eccentric and even monstrous feel.

Hokusai Manga, that corresponds to a set of 15 volumes, of which the first was printed in 1812 and the last in 1878, 30 years after the death of the artist, reveals the extraordinary popularity of these not so common illustrations which aroused much curiosity. The scene depicts two women with long necks and one of them with a monstrous face smoking pipe. A shamisen (a three-stringed musical instrument) player and another three-eyed monster who is being mocked. The surrealistic, humorous, grotesque and monstrous imaginary, reveals, according to Laura J. Mueller, the funny personality of the artist. However, we believe that more than this, it reveals the distant and rather interesting origin of the iconographic persistence of monsters and bizarre creatures which can still be found in the Japanese Manga and which are still quite popular.

To sum up one can refer some important aspects of the Japanese print and sketch: the remarkable techniques that allow the visual effect of trans-
parent material (with Torii Kiyonaga 1752-1815 and the Katsukawa school that made an endeavour to put aside the laws forbidding the representation of the floating world and the geishas); embossed printing (karazuri or kime-dashi); the possibility of colour gradations (bokashi); immitation of shiny or metallic surfaces (tsuyazuri e shomenzuri); in the 19th century in the 20’s the Prussian blue pigment appears in illustrations in diptychs, triptychs and pentatychs; the adoption of new Western techniques; the start of the representation of Western topics (such as the European population in Japan); the famous landscape motifs, the fūkei-ga (for example with the renowned master Katsushika Hokusai portraying “The Great Wave”, at the dawn of 1930s); themes with birds and flowers (kochō-ga) and themes with historic warriors (musha-e) and famous Chinese and Japanese.

With the reforms of the Tempō Era (1830-44) forbidding the representation of geishas, prostitutes and kabuki actors and their names and awakening
This fascinating print portrays two actors – one in the foreground and the other, who has already died, is encircled. This portrait pays homage to a reference actor who inspires the living actor who adopted the name of the predecessor. It is also rather interesting to note that the actors depicted on this print are rivals in the kabuki play based on The tale of the Soga Brothers (Soga monogatari) where they interact with each other and then at a moment of mie tension their crossed eyes and strong, dramatic expression are highlighted.

the interest to body and face expressiveness (Katsushika Hokusai was also an enthusiast of this form) an interesting composition of drawings depicting the physical features and expressions of various actors which would allow fans to distinguish them even without their name on the print, is elaborated.

With the continuous decline of the Shogunate and with the beginning of the Meiji Era in 1868, a true revolution occured in graphic arts in Japan. The introduction of the photograph (shashin or copy truth) in 1848 and of lithography (sekihan or stone printing) in 1860 trigger, together with the Meiji liberalism a change in habits and aesthetic and representation concepts. In 1877 there were already 14 photograph studios and 116 professionals who satisfied the demand for exotic images of Japan and an increasing consumption of this new technology by the Japanese.

The new concepts of realism, and no longer those of an idealised representation and authenticity of the human body produce a new fixed reality that little by little is copied by the traditional techniques of sketching and printing. When the Meiji government stipulated that the American and French models of graphic arts should be adopted by the Japanese schools of art, thus leading to the creation of the Tokyo School of Fine Art (Tōkyō bijutsu gakkō) in 1887, alternatives to representations, aesthetic concepts and artistic productions in Japan were highly encouraged. The result was the foundation of two sketch and print movements: sōsaku hanga and shin hanga. Whilst the first was based on total freedom of work and jiga jikoku jishō ("self-draw, self carved, self printed") representation, the shin hanga ("new print") movement based itself on the old model of the ukiyo-e and on the interaction amongst the different specialists (artist, carver, printer and publisher) for the final product which was completely distinct from the print of the first movement.

The shin hanga movement is one of imaginary fusion between the techniques and visions that cross the past and the present. Although the traditional Japanese quality is completely assured, new techniques such as drawing based on a photograph or on live models, realism, a more modern and Western attitude that is visible in the illustrations and in the approach of the theme- body-, the individual portrait (inspired by the ōkubi-e ut with
marked western style and realism) lead to a new cultural dynamic that originated a demand for this new aesthetic and representative "liking". It is quite a fascinating task to specify the elements that allude to the traditional past, its vision and imaginary and on the other hand to the novelties that show how "modernism", originality, the acceptance of the western world and the fascination for new visions and concepts increased rather rapidly.


Master Yoshida reveals in this print the unavoidable fusion (also due to his course and trips) between traditionally Japanese techniques and themes and reality, visions and aesthetic western concepts. Pertaining to technique, this work enhances the passing of a water colour picture first done by the artist, onto a sketch block revealing the mastery in the work attained through three-dimensional effects resorting to shade, background texture and to the whole composition with highlight to the garment on the floor that gives the image depth. The authenticity of the female figure, its balance and realism show how the new distinct western "liking" was adopted. Another aspect is the theme "Study of a Nude" which is a natural topic of fine arts in a Europe marked by the ancestry Greek and Latin classical culture. It is interesting to verify the change in the approach to the human body and beauty and its enchantment now with the subject nude compared to the more classical approach of the bijin where the nude, the body is not admired as previously focused.
Strong Women Beautiful Men, an ironic title – or perhaps not – that makes us think more carefully about the characters depicted on the prints that still make us dream, accomplishes with Laura J. Mueller the confirmation of the history of the Japanese sketch and print according to the dichotomy of the Beautiful and the Renowned. Unfortunately for us and for this article we were not able to find any information as to the museography of the exhibition (museologically it is comprehended and the course of this nucleus within the history of the Toledo Museum of Art), concepts of scenography, ambiance and presentation that, like the sketches, witness ideologies, visions, representations of a certain period and space and the inherent meanings.

Curiously in Portugal, at the very moment a sketch exhibition (O Armário Milagroso: Visões do Japão no Final do séc. XIX através da Gravura Japonesa – Exhibition of the Manuel Paias Collection on the commemorations of the 150 years of the birth of Wenceslau de Moraes), of art collector Dr. Manuel Paias, is touring the country marked by the sober design of the exposition and the permanent curiosity as we observe it through guided visits and brief talks by the collector himself.

The themes crisscross and one can enjoy the simplicity, depth, elegance, subtleness, vigour, the precise light and the vibrant colours that make this graphic art an eternal source of inspiration and enchantment.

In the Japanese prints the grasp of that short-lived moment, of the floating world and its imaginary portrayed onto a normal sheet of paper allows it to be shared in a symbolic and codified way in the future, affording it the statute of masterpiece due to its exotic imaginary, refined technique and aesthetic concepts of the world and Man.

The ukiyo-e have become eternal records of this past moment undergoing constant change, influenced by other techniques that might have softened the original essence and the characteristic energy that led to the act of drawing, carving and printing but assure the exaltation of those that were once and will always be the finest representation of Beauty and Celebrity in Japan.

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Sites:

Toledo Museum of Art:
http://www.toledomuseum.org

The sketch *Rain in May* by Suzuki Harunobu recently acquired by the Toledo Museum of Art:
http://www.toledomuseum.org/Collection_Print.htm

Dr. Manuel Paias and his collection:
http://www.man-pai.com/index_e.htm