

ENTERTAINMENT

MEDIA & BOOKS

These new Japanese art exhibitions from the 20th century reveal hidden treasures

By Scotti Hill, Contributor | Feb 18, 2020, 9:37am MST



Utagawa Toyokuni I's "Watching Fireworks from Boats," an early 19th century color woodcut, purchased with funds from the John Preston Creer and Mary Elizabeth Brockbank Elizabeth Creer Memorial Fund. | Utah Museum of Fine Arts

SALT LAKE CITY — There's much to love about Japanese art — from the glorious landscape scenes, to the graceful human portraits and from the labor intensive sumi-e ink drawings, to the gold-leaf covered screens — centuries of Japanese artmaking weave a luminous tale of patient dedication and cultural vibrancy.

In its latest offering, the Utah Museum of Fine Arts pairs two exhibitions — a traveling show curated by Andreas Mark of the Minneapolis Institute of Art and a sampling of artworks and artifacts from the museum's own Japanese collection. The former focuses exclusively on the work of seven 20th-century masters, who ushered in a revival of traditional Japanese woodblock printmaking.

The museum's selection of art and artifacts from its own collection is displayed in a room leading to the seven masters exhibition, providing salient context from the Edo period, which is the era immediately preceding the artistic revitalization of the 20th century.

The idea for an expansive Japanese exhibition originated in 2017, when the museum's associate curator of collections and antiques, Luke Kelly, lobbied executive director Gretchen Dietrich to consider the idea of combining the museum's collection with another monumental showing of Japanese art.

"We've never done a traveling Japanese exhibition before but have always been on the lookout," Kelly said. "Of course, we've built a collection of our own over the course of 69 years, but there are still gaps."

Later, a series of coincidences led Kelly to Dr. Andreas Marks, the Mary Griggs Burke Curator of Japanese and Korean Art at the Minneapolis Institute of Art.

Even at its inception, Marks envisioned the exhibition as a traveling show.

"Why not let it go to institutions that don't have as rich a collection?" he asked.

After working with an international group designed to craft traveling shows, the museum was selected as the first of three destinations for the exhibition.

If you go ...

What: "Seven Masters: 20th-Century Japanese Woodblock Prints"

Where: Utah Museum of Fine Arts, 410 Campus Center Drive

When: Through April 26, Thursday-Tuesday, 10 a.m.-5 p.m.; Wednesday, 10 a.m.-9 p.m.; closed Monday

Phone: 801-581-7332

Web: umfa.utah.edu

Presented in a room preceding the entrance to the Seven Masters exhibit, the museum has brought out some anchor items from its collection, including two swords, three screens, a sculpture, woodblock prints and samurai armor, many of which have not been displayed for over a decade.

Replete with historical information about Japan's Edo period (1603–1868), visitors can gain insight into a transformative era of great modernization and creativity from these items.

The screens, lush in detail and intricate subject matter, are adorned with gold leaf, which reflect brightly in dim Japanese interior environments. These screens embody two distinct styles — the Kano and Yoshi schools, respectively — which are roughly 200 years apart and showcase the dedicated artistry of their makers.



Natori Shunsen's "The Actor Ichikawa Sadanji II as Narukami" (from the series Creative Prints: Collected Portraits by Shunsen), which combines woodblock print, ink and color on paper with mica and embossing. | Minneapolis Institute of Arts

One screen, expansive in its scale and subject matter, depicts Japan's famed epic "The Tale of Genji," of the 11th century. The fable accounts various episodes in the life of Hikaru Genji, a high-born son of a noble emperor and his concubine, according to

didactic labels accompanying the work. Various scenes from the tale are depicted throughout the screen.

The scenes show — in spatially sophisticated sections, no less — figures interacting in various domestic places and the natural abundance of foliage outside their architectural boundaries.

Kelly contextualizes the art and artifacts with thorough historical information throughout the exhibit, which testifies to the many social and political changes of Edo-era Japan.

Originally, screens were commissioned for feudal lords, but the rise of the merchant class in the 17th century expanded the potential ownership of such items.

Similarly, as Japanese political prosperity rendered samurai armor less necessary, military craftsman turned their talents elsewhere, harnessing the delicate skill and mastery of materials for which their trade required.

As an example, Articulated Raptor, made by an armor maker, is a beautifully meticulous bird sculpture with fully movable wings, a visual delight in its sheer artistry and detail.

The Samurai armor was one worn in processional parades from Kyoto to Edo and still bears the dents of musket shells used to test its durability.

Elsewhere are two remarkable swords from the 19th century, which, according to Kelly, "blurs the line between utility and artistry."

Eventually, the average person was afforded the opportunity to acquire art. Woodblock prints, now lauded as the pinnacle of Japanese artistic achievement, were at one point the price of a working man's meal. Their modest size made them not only affordable, but highly collectable. Although Japanese landscape prints are now the stuff of legend — think Hokusai's famous "The Great Wave off Kanagawa (1830–31)" — it wasn't until the 1830s that the idea of a landscape as a standalone subject was fully implemented, according to Marks.



Kawase Hasui's "Snow at Kiyomizu Hall in Ueno, July 1929," a woodblock print, ink and color on paper. | Minneapolis Institute of Arts

The museum presents the woodblock prints as they would appear to a typical consumer in Edo-era Japan, for purchase from a bookseller and displayed on a tabletop for optimal viewing.

“Traditionally, woodblock prints were made using a system of shared labor,” Marks said.

The artist would first design the image, then the wood carver would physically inscribe the design into the wood. The printer would then print the carved wood and project any colors onto the paper’s surface. Lastly, the publisher — who owned exclusive rights to the entire print — would market the final artwork in a series, Marks explained. While popular artists could expect to receive an upfront payment for their labor, Marks continued to explain that “royalties” are a decidedly modern phenomenon, and newly established artists could expect to be cut out of the profits completely.

According to Marks, publishers in this era had to make approximately 600 prints just to break even, and many more if they expected a profit.

Many of the early prints were scenes of Kabuki theatre akin to today’s film posters, making it desirable and exceedingly easy for everyday working people to purchase such tokens of a performance they’d seen.

While woodblock prints enjoyed their status as a revered staple of Japanese artmaking for centuries, the practice went out of practice in the early 20th century, due in part to the rise of newspapers and photography, which rendered the once labor-intensive process obsolete.

About a decade later, the process was revived in grand fashion.

A look at the seven masters

In 1915, a new generation of artists slowly began nurturing an interest in reviving traditional Japanese woodblock prints. Bucking the traditional multi-tiered system of divided labor, artists were now keen to take over the entire process of woodblock printing themselves, in a practice known as *sōsaku-hanga*.

What started as a small movement among art students in Tokyo spread to established painters, according to Marks, who through their revival of traditional Japanese woodblock techniques ushered in an artistic revolution of sorts. Demand was fueled by smaller outputs of prints as well as foreign, and particularly western, collectors.

The exhibition displays the first known articulation of the style, Friedrich (Fritz) Capelani's "Umbrellas (1915)." Visitors also encounter the work of Hashiguchi Goyo, a painter by trade but an eventual figurehead of the woodblock printing revolution. His subjects, lithe and delicate figures, are finely executed. His work also demonstrates his innovation with scale, a new iteration of an old style in which woodblock prints were commonly quite small.

Fellow artist Ito Shinsui designed hundreds of prints, focusing on beautiful subjects and heroes from folk tales. Meanwhile, Torii Kotondo, an artist in a long lineage of illustrators, became known for his compelling portraits of female subjects, according to museum didactic labels.

As a fascinating revival of past art forms was underway, Marks said that the use of modern technology was also influential, as evidenced by the work of Natori Shunsen.

Displayed in two horizontal rows, Natori Shunsen's portraits of Kabuki (Japanese drama) theater actors are not to be missed. The variety and intricacy of the portraits display the beauty inherent to Kabuki, a uniquely Japanese art form.

During Shunsen's lifetime, the practice of photographing Kabuki actors was well-established. Unlike his ancient predecessors, Shunsen used the photographs as the basis for his portraits, adding gorgeously minute and intricate details only achievable through the woodblock printing process.

Elsewhere, Kawase Hasui's landscapes evoke a nostalgia for an old Japan not consumed by modernization. In them, the artist captures with exquisite tactility, the sensation of humans navigating rain and snow storms, subjects for which he was renowned in his lifetime and that continues to resonate in Japan today.

"Japan is an art-loving nation," Marks said. In the United States however, art museum attendance continues to decrease, meaning less people are apt to enjoy the fine offerings of hundreds of regional institutions. The museum's dual exhibitions serve as a reminder of the global gateway awaiting those who choose to spend an afternoon in its walls, serving visual wonders for art lovers and history enthusiasts alike.