



The East Heads West

Explore centuries of Japanese art, from woodblocks to samurai swords

By Josh Petersen - March 5, 2020

"Accessible and beautiful."

These are the words Luke Kelly uses to describe the artworks in the new collection "Beyond the Divide: Merchant, Artist, Samurai in Edo Japan," which he curated for the Utah Museum of Fine Arts.

"Japonisme."

This is the word the French used to describe Japan's influence on Western art, first viewed when Japan reopened trade with the West in 1854. The woodblocks, with their bold colors, elegant line and flat perspective, surprised, then inspired Impressionists and Post-Impressionists like Van Gogh and Degas who incorporated the new way of seeing into their paintings. And they still surprise and inspire.



You don't need to be an expert in Japanese art to appreciate this diverse show, which includes screen and scroll paintings, sculptures, color woodblock prints and even samurai weaponry. The intricate pieces on display are both tranquil and vibrant.

"Beyond the Divide" is one of two exhibitions at UMFA featuring Japanese art. The other, "Seven Masters: 20th Century Japanese Woodblock Prints," is a traveling collection from the Minneapolis Institute of Art.

"Seven Masters" focuses on the early 20th century, where ukiyo-e (Japanese woodblock prints) experienced an unexpected revival. Though the form had been on the decline for several decades, a group

*HASHIGUCHI GOYŌ, WOMAN
APPLYING POWDER, 1918,
WOODBLOCK PRINT, INK AND
COLOR ON PAPER WITH MICA AND
EMBOSSING. SELF-PUBLISHED.
CARVED BY TAKANO
SHICHINOSUKE. PRINTED BY
SOMEKAWA KANZŌ. MINNEAPOLIS
INSTITUTE OF ART, GIFT OF ELLEN
AND FRED WELLS 2002.161.206.
PHOTO: MINNEAPOLIS INSTITUTE
OF ART.*

of artists created new images, depicting everything from lush landscapes to kabuki actresses. This new movement — shin hanga — grew in popularity, and the prints were reproduced widely. “The quality of them is astounding, not only in regards to the perfect production (having been printed from wood blocks) but also aesthetically,” said curator Andreas Marks.

“Beyond the Divide” goes back in time to the Edo period, between 1603 and 1868. Kelly chose to organize the show by focusing on the samurai, the merchant and the artisan. Samurais, who traditionally occupied the highest position in society, commissioned fancy armor and swords. Merchants, who grew rapidly from their low-class roots in this period, became new patrons for the arts, expanding the possibilities from artists. In Edo Japan, artists were able to flourish, often creating works for private residences that stayed behind beautifully decorated screen dividers.

These two exhibits span hundreds of years and represent a period of major changes for Japan, including economic transition, greater contact with the broader world and increasing modernization. UMFA’s displays combine the most famous trademarks of Japanese art while also demonstrating the wide diversity of these periods.

“I am excited that the tour now starts with Salt Lake City as the first venue,” Marks says. And though the art is from the opposite side of the world, this UMFA exhibit is still locally connected. Almost all of the pieces in “Beyond the Divide” have been part of the museum’s existing collection for years.

“Seven Masters” will be at UMFA until April 26 and “Beyond the Divide” will be open through July 5. Visit umfa.utah.edu for more information.