Ukiyo-e: pictures of the Floating World

The V&A's collection of ukiyo-e is one of the largest and finest in the world, with over 25,000 prints, paintings, drawings and books.

Ukiyo-e means 'Pictures of the Floating World'. Images of everyday Japan, mass-produced for popular consumption in the Edo period (1615-1868), they represent one of the highpoints of Japanese cultural achievement. Popular themes include famous beauties and well-known actors, renowned landscapes, heroic tales and folk stories.

In the Edo period (1615-1868), fans provided a popular format for print designers' ingenuity and imagination. The designs produced for fans are usually themed around summer, festivals, and the lighter side of life.

Ukiyo-e prints from the collection are available for study in the V&A Prints and Drawings study room.

What are ukiyo-e?

The art of ukiyo-e is most frequently associated with colour woodblock prints, popular in Japan from their development in 1765 until the closing decades of the Meiji period.
The earliest prints were simple black and white prints taken from a single block. Sometimes these prints were coloured by hand, but this process was expensive. In the 1740s, additional woodblocks were used to print the colours pink and green, but it wasn’t until 1765 that the technique of using multiple colour woodblocks was perfected. The glorious full colour prints that resulted were known as nishiki-e or ‘brocade pictures’.

The expression ukiyo-e is not however a reference to the printing process, nor is it limited to colour prints. The term translates as ‘Pictures of the Floating World’ and is associated with particular subjects and a certain aesthetic. The same artists who designed woodblock prints also created paintings for more affluent clients.

The production process

The team involved in the production of ukiyo-e has famously been called the 'ukiyo-e quartet'. It comprised the publisher (who usually had overall control of the process), the designer, the block cutter and the printer.

Once the design was complete, an exact copy was made and placed facedown on a cherry wood block. The block cutter then carved directly through the copy to produce what is known as the key-block.

The printer used the key-block to produce a number of black and white prints, from which further blocks could be made for each colour needed in the final print. Known as key-block proofs, these prints feature registration marks: small rectangles outside the area of the picture. When the colour blocks were carved, these marks were used to create stops so that the printer could line up the separate colours exactly.
The V&A's collection includes a number of copyists' drawings. Normally, these drawings would be destroyed in the production of the key-block. They are therefore rare survivals that were never realised as prints. The collection also includes a number of key-block proofs. Together, these offer unique insights into the production methods of ukiyo-e.


Chickens and Asiatic Dayflowers by Katsushika Hokusai, 1832. Museum no. E.1361-1916

Popular themes

Prints could be produced quite cheaply and in large numbers. While only the wealthy could afford paintings by the artists of the day, ukiyo-e prints were enjoyed by a much wider audience. The subjects depicted in these prints reflect the interests and aspirations of the people who bought them.

Beauties and actors

'Pictures of the Floating World', the literal translation of ukiyo-e, refers to the licensed brothel and theatre districts of Japan's major cities during the Edo period. Inhabited by prostitutes and Kabuki actors, these were the playgrounds of the newly wealthy merchant class.
Despite their low status in the strict social hierarchy of the time, actors and courtesans (high-class prostitutes) became the style icons of their day. Their fashions spread to the general populace via inexpensive woodblock prints.

**Landscapes**

Perhaps the most iconic of all ukiyo-e prints, Hokusai's 'Great Wave off the Coast of Kanagawa' is an arresting example of a landscape print. Centuries of peace during the Edo period, and the development of a sophisticated highway network, fostered a culture of mass travel in Japan.

Prints of famous and beautiful places served as cheap and easy souvenirs. Also, new ways of looking at the world, imported from the West through Dutch and Chinese traders, awoke an interest in drawing from life.

**Heroic tales**

Japan has a long and rich tradition of folklore and storytelling. These tales of heroes and villains, monsters and demons, provided dramatic subjects for woodblock prints.

Artists such as Utagawa Kuniyoshi and his pupil Kawanabe Kyōsai used vibrant colours and striking compositions to create vivid prints full of movement and action. These captured the public's imagination.

**Fan prints**

Fans are still a common sight in the heat of the Japanese summer. In the Edo period (1615-1868), they provided a popular format for print designers' ingenuity and imagination.
The designs on fan prints are a reflection of summer. Lively festivals are shown in vibrant colours while lighter designs suggest the sun-drenched haze and deep blues offer cooling relief. As deeply personal items, the range of designs mirrors the tastes of the people of Edo period Japan.

The V&A's collection of fan prints is remarkable both for its size and variety. Because fans were in regular use, they are less likely to survive than other prints. Among those that do survive, pristine examples are rare.

Fan Sellers by Suzuki Kiitsu, 1832. Museum no. E.4934-1919
Shichirigahama Beach at Kamakura in Sagami Province by Utagawa Hiroshige, February 1855. Museum no. E.12067-1886

To view related images from the collection, please click [here](http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/u/ukiyo-e-pictures-of-the-floating-world/) and explore the images on the right side of the page.