# Japanese popular prints

from votive slips to playing cards

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Kanagawa Prefectural Museum of Cultural History, figs. 74, 75, 114, 137, 148, 149 (left)

Ômuta City Miike Playing Card Memorial Museum, figs. 195, 197, 198, 199, 200, 205

Japan Toy Museum, figs. 46, 170, 194, 207

Nagoya Broadcasting Network Ltd.,Co., figs. 22, 79, 80, 163

Kobe City Museum, figs. 2, 12, 53

Paper Museum, Tokyo, figs. 1, 28, 177

Pyonpyondō, Tokyo, figs. 214, 215, 216

Gallery Sobi, Tokyo, figs. 143, 144

Kawanabe Kyōsai Memorial Museum, figs. 136, 152

Kidō Hiroko Collection, figs. 18, 219

Naito Museum of Pharmaceutical Science and Industry, figs. 87, 117

Courtesy of the National Museum of Japanese History, figs. 131, 134

Tobacco and Salt Museum, Tokyo, figs. 65, 171

Dasoku-an, fig. 158

Fujisawa City Board of Education, fig. 62

Isao Collection, fig. 155

Isetatsu, Tokyo, fig. 212

The Japan Ukiyoe Museum, fig. 81

Kōzanji, Kyoto, fig. 161

National Institue of Japanese Literature, fig. 115

National Theatre of Japan, fig. 132

Private collection, Japan, fig. 142

Sugoroku Museum www.sugoroku.net, fig. 182

Sumo Museum, fig. 41

S. Watanabe Color Print Co., fig. 159

Tokyo Matsuya Co. Ltd., fig. 208

The Tsubouchi Memorial Theatre Museum, fig. 174 (402-0236~8)

Yamashita Kazumasa Collection, fig. 63

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Loan courtesy of the Amarillo Museum of Art, Amarillo, Texas, Gift of Dr. & Mrs William T. Price, fig. 17

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Frontispiece: *Ichimatsu chiyogami* (see fig. 211, p. 195)

# Contents

# Notes

## Historical eras

| | |
|---|---|
| Nara | 710 – 794 |
| Heian | 794 – 1185 |
| Kamakura | 1185 – 1333 |
| Muromachi | 1333 – 1568 |
| Azuchi Momoyama | 1568 – 1600 |
| Tokugawa (Edo) | 1603 – 1868 |
| Meiji | 1868 – 1912 |
| Taishō | 1912 – 1926 |
| Shōwa | 1926 – 1989 |
| Heisei | 1989 – |

(Discrepancies can occur in the translation of the Japanese calendar to Western dates.)

This book predominantly covers the Tokugawa (commonly known as Edo) period (1603–1868) and the Meiji period (1868–1912).

Between 794 and 1868 the imperial capital of Japan was Kyoto. In 1603, after years of war, Ieyasu of the powerful Tokugawa family had himself proclaimed shogun, ultimately based in the eastern city of Edo. The emperor remained in Kyoto, but real power now rested with the shogun in Edo who effectively ran a military government. Answerable to him were regional daimyo (feudal lords) who controlled the 250 domains with some autonomy. The warrior class (samurai) were given social status, although not necessarily wealth, because of their role as protectors. Farmers, craftsmen and merchants ranked below them in the social hierarchy.

Between about 1639 and 1854 the shogunate had a policy of national seclusion (*sakoku*) and made strenuous attempts to close the country to the outside world in order to strengthen their authority. Travel abroad for Japanese people was forbidden and only the Dutch and Chinese were allowed access through Nagasaki port. The seclusion came to an end when American ships led by Commodore Matthew Perry appeared off the coast not far from Edo in 1853 demanding Japan open her borders. The years between Perry's arrival and the beginning of the Meiji era in 1868 were marked by crisis after crisis. Finally in January 1868 it was announced that rule by the emperor was restored (known as the Meiji Restoration). The emperor moved from Kyoto to Edo (now renamed Tokyo) and the imperial government took charge. The Meiji period saw a rapid move towards westernisation, commonly known as *bunmei kaika* (civilisation and enlightenment).

## Language

Japanese language uses three alphabets:

1 *kanji* = Sino-Japanese characters (reasonable literacy requires knowledge of 1800). *Kanji* are used to write the main concepts of a sentence.
2 *hiragana* = A 48-letter phonetic syllabary. Used for grammatical purposes and can be used for writing in place of *kanji* so that more adults (and children) are able to read it.
3 *katakana* = A 48-letter phonetic syllabary now mostly used to write words from other languages in Japanese.

## Transliteration

Macrons have been added to long vowels except for Japanese words now commonly used in English.

Japanese words are italicised, except for those (eg sumo, ukiyo-e) which have become Anglicised.

Japanese names appear in Japanese order, family name first, followed by given name.

Artists used a variety of names that changed frequently during their career. For simplicity's sake the name by which they are most commonly known is used throughout.

*fig.1*
***Iroha* alphabet in human form**
*Jintai iroha*
Anon
1830–44

This print is a witty rendering of the *hiragana* phonetic alphabet with each letter in human form – some struggling valiantly with rolls of text. The characters are laid out in what is called the *iroha* (basic ABC) arrangement which forms a Buddhist poem on the transitory nature of life. Reading downwards from the top right it begins *i-ro-ha-ni-ho-he-to-chi-ri-nu-ru-o* (colours are fragrant but they soon fade). The sound of each letter in all 3 alphabets is given above the letter form. For a Japanese child embarking on remembering the basic alphabet, such prints must have been a wonderful way to learn.

The same *iroha* alphabetical order forms the basis of many card games (see fig.198, p.186 and fig.204, pp.190–1).

# Foreword

I am approaching the subject of this book not as an academic expert in Japanese woodblock prints but as an artist with a love and knowledge of the technique in all its applications and guises. Connoisseurs of Japanese print are familiar with the so-called Golden Age of woodblock in the late 18th century and the work of such masters as Utamaro, Sharaku and the later talents of Hokusai and Hiroshige. I would hesitate to claim that the eclectic mix of prints introduced in this book equals the finest works of the Golden Age in terms of artistic merit or technical prowess, but I do feel that they reveal fascinating cultural and historical connections that extend into many unexpected areas of Japanese tradition. Above all else though, they exemplify the visual playfulness, curiosity and sophistication characteristic of the Edo period (1603–1868). This acute understanding of the power of the image, the appetite for it, and the infinite possibilities offered by a common visual language, were indulged during the reclusive Edo era. It was also these strengths that helped to make the process of re-opening to the outside world and the cultural shifts involved more bearable during the upheavals of the late 19th century.

The Western view of Japanese woodblock is very much coloured by our initial contact, which was primarily through the single sheet print (*ichimai-e*). This form grew out of Japan's already rich print tradition largely developed through books, often illustrated. Although visually very sophisticated, illustrated books are not as attractive or as accessible to a Western audience unable to read them, so they have been largely overlooked. The prints I have been researching would not have been valued as 'high art' and their target audiences, often women and children, would likewise not have been considered of high social status. This has had implications for the survival of the objects themselves. Single sheet prints, valued abroad, left Japan in huge numbers and thus survived destruction by earthquake, fire and war. The essentially ephemeral objects I am looking at here were not so fortunate. As a result, relatively few remain even though they must have been produced in sufficient quantities to cover production costs. They may be modest in terms of production and target audience, but these objects have the ability to shed light on woodblock's social role as a tool for education and dissemination of knowledge and information, religious practice, cultural cohesion and above all else as a source of fun and amusement for both adults and children.

The heroes of this story are the carvers and printers of the woodblock world and they remain largely unacknowledged. As E F Strange says in his 1931 publication, *Japanese Colour Prints*,[1] 'These men were, then, essentially of the people. They made for a living what it best paid them to make: and this simple fact is worth keeping in mind in view of the glamour which certain European critics, dazzled by their amazing and (from our point of view) unaccountable skill, have endeavoured to throw over them'. We have become familiar with the names of the artists and some of the publishers responsible for bringing prints to the market, but the names of the craftsmen are rarely known. Their extraordinary technical skill has never been in doubt. When the prints first appeared outside Japan, the subject matter and composition were startlingly fresh and unfamiliar, but the technique too was considered extraordinary. For the inhabitants of downtown Edo (now Tokyo), a visit to the local carver or printer was not unlike a visit to a copy bureau now. Between them the carver and printer held the skills that were the sole means of mass reproduction available at the time. These were skills that could not only produce objects of desire and delight, but potentially of political and hence social importance too. The ruling shogunate kept an ever-watchful eye on the world of print. Woodblock may have skilfully reflected the playful life and times of the urbanite, but it could never claim to have become a real vehicle for social change by reflecting the harsh lot of the rural peasant.

Many of the objects I examine here were produced in the late

1 Edward F Strange (1931), *Japanese Colour Prints*, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, p.131–132.

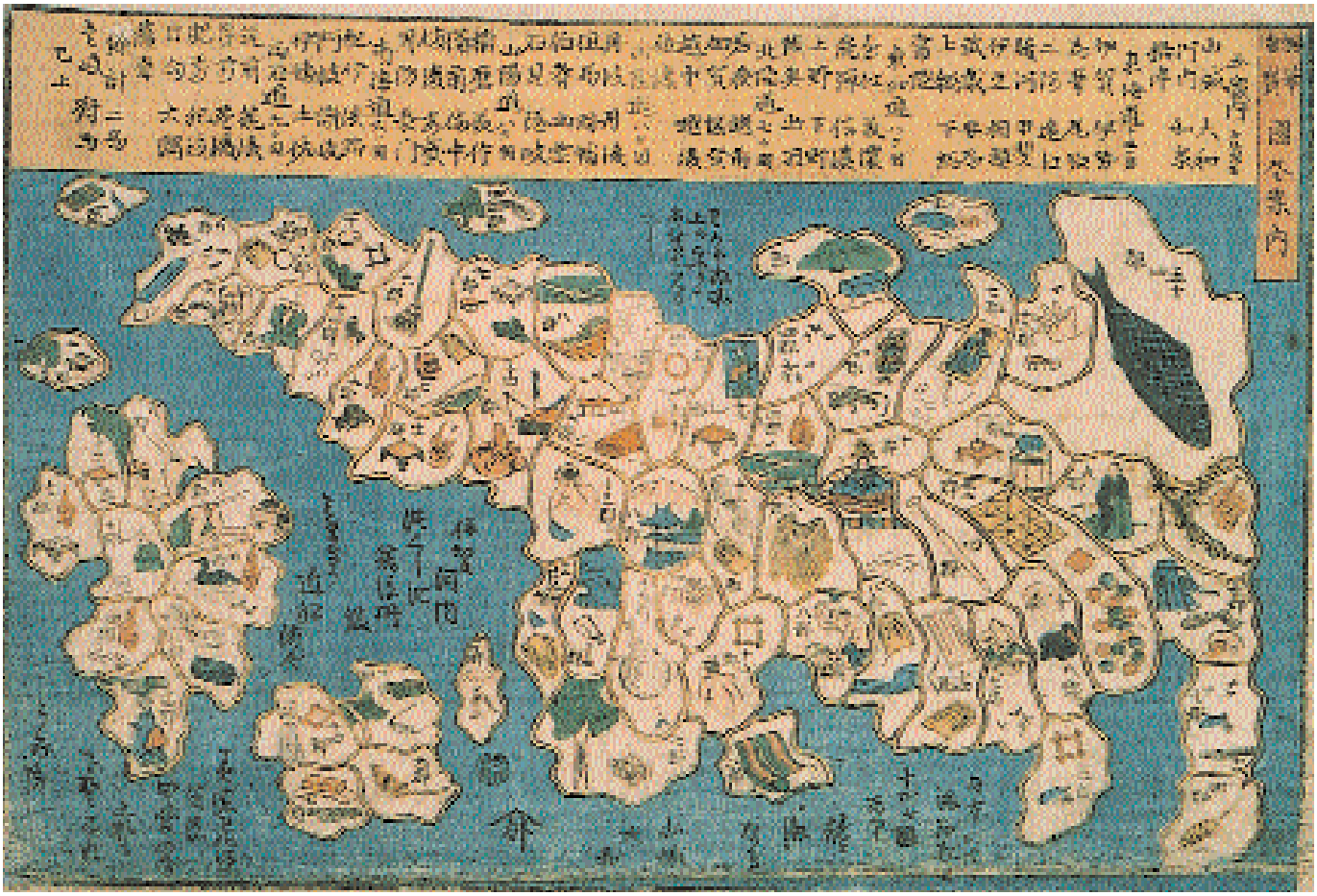

*fig. 2*
**A Rebus Guide to the Regions**
*Muhitsu chōhō kuni zukushi annai*
Anon
1830–44

With a broad appeal, even for the illiterate, this map of Japan substitutes pictures for words to identify each region.

In the centre of the large island (Honshū) the mountain (*yama*) combines with castle (*shiro*) to make Yamashiro, the ancient name for the Kyoto area. The enormous fish (top right) is a Japanese bluefish (*mutsu*) representing an area of the same name, now part of Aomori prefecture. Far left, the lower tip of Kyushu island shows half a scabbard (*sa* of *saya*) and a wife (*tsuma*) to make Satsuma.

This map is a classic *hanji-e* (rebus print, see p.146) and would have been accessible even to those unable to read.

Edo and early Meiji periods, towards the end of woodblock's long supremacy. These modest prints became alternatives to the production of the single sheet print in an attempt to prolong the craftsmen's livelihood a little longer. Finally, woodblock succumbed to a combination of the decline in the traditional domestic context for the output and the introduction of more efficient and less labour intensive mechanical methods of printing from the West. It was no contest and woodblock lost its place as the method of mass reproduction. Woodblock clings on today in a niche role as a producer of souvenirs, reproducer of paintings or a medium for individual artists. In this book, as a devotee of the technique, I would like to highlight some of the curious delights of woodblock's twilight years and at least give the artists and craftsmen a belated but decent send off. I hope the diverse objects I have assembled will bear witness to their visual flair and technical prowess, and illustrate the role played by a modest printing method in the extraordinarily sophisticated development of one particular country's culture and visual language.

Rebecca Salter, 2006