HITO: Human Faces and Figures in Ukiyo-e

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The Hōsa Bunko Galleries

Introduction

Throughout the history of Ukiyo-e, two of the central genres were pictures of beautiful women (*bijin-ga*) and pictures of Kabuki actors (*yakusha-e*). These individuals were just as popular as television actors, movie stars, and superstar singers are today.

The methods of depicting popular actors and famous women changed throughout the period. As time passed, portraits of professional Sumo wrestlers were also produced. Not only real-life individuals were depicted, "warrior pictures" portraying individual fictional characters were also created and Ukiyo-e expanded to portray many different types of people.

Moreover, in the latter half of Ukiyo-e production, human figures play an important role in landscape pictures, especially those illustrated by Hiroshige. It could be said that depictions of the human figure propelled the development of Ukiyo-e illustration.

This exhibition presents the many aspects of the human figure as portrayed in Ukiyo-e, including who they depicted, how they were depicted, and more. Along with showing how heroes, stars, and popular figures were depicted, this exhibit will also show how people of the day viewed Ukiyo-e and what their hopes and expectations were. We hope this exhibition will expand your understanding of Edo period culture.

CHAPTER 1
DEPICTING ACTORS

The goal of pictures of Kabuki actors was to present the appearance of the actor exactly as they were. However, early pictures of actors did not portray the face of the actor as they were in life but changed slightly based on each role they portrayed. However, the identity of the actor could be confirmed by the crest on their costume and audiences enjoyed these pictures.

The first true-to-life portraits of actors appeared in the *Ehon Butai Ōgi* (Picture Book of the Stage in Fan-shapes, 1770), a woodblock print book that contained 79 portraits of actors. Appealing to the desires of admirers who hoped to come into close contact with the actors, this book was a huge success. Katsukawa Shunshō (1743-1792) displayed genius in creating true-to-life portraits and led the genre of actor's pictures in the late 18th century.

Though pictures up to Shunshō's day were full body pictures, the emergence of "ōkubi-e," or close-up lifelike portraits of the head and upper torso, encouraged the creation of new variations of portrait types. Just before the end of the Edo period, Utagawa Kunisada (1786-1865) and others of the Utagawa school of Ukiyo-e artists depicted actors' costumes in great detail in their portraits.

CHAPTER 2
DEPICTING HEROES:
From Historical Pictures to Warrior Portraits

In the 19th century, audiences turned away from pictures of actors and towards portraits depicting the heroes of the stories that Kabuki dramas were based on. "Historical pictures" depicting war tales about the clash between the Minamoto and Taira clans became increasingly popular just before the end of the Edo period and many works were printed depicting heroes in their most brave moments.

Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849) played a pivotal role in developing the pictorialization of classical tales. Many of Hokusai's illustrations that demonstrate his exceptional illustrative talent were included in Kyokutei Bakin and Ryūtei Tanehiko's serialized novels and Hokusai significantly expanded the possibilities of illustrating fiction.

Utagawa Kuniyoshi's (1798-1861) importance during the heyday of historical pictures cannot be overlooked. Kuniyoshi established the surprising technique of creating landscape pictures using a triptych, a set of three pictures that form a single image, and further enhanced the appeal of historical pictures. His pupil, Tsukioka Yoshitoshi (1839-1892) illustrated current events occurring during the Edo period as well as historical tales and stories, opening new ground for historical pictures.

Utagawa Kuniyoshi is famous as well for his production of "musha-e," or warrior portraits featuring the heroes of those fictional tales depicted in historical pictures.

CHAPTER 3
DEPICTING WOMEN

In early Ukiyo-e, most women illustrated are famous courtesans, but as time went on, townswomen were also pictured. The up-and-coming printer Tsutaya Jūzaburō (1750-97) hired Kitagawa Utamaro to create "ōkubi-e," close-up portraits of the head and upper torso, of women. The features of each woman's face were depicted slightly differently. The differentiation of facial expression made each portrait individual, but it also expressed each woman's emotions. The facial expressions depicted in Utamaro's pictures of beautiful women are his defining characteristic.

This chapter will introduce the major works that were created after Utamaro's pictures of beautiful women developed the technique of conveying facial expressions. Ukiyo-e from the end of the Edo period often display the sensuality of women. Keisai Eisen (1790-1848), who ran a brothel himself, leans heavily towards depicting women's emotions in this way, but Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1798-1861) depicted spirited women who lived in the real world. Moreover, Kuniyoshi's fellow pupil, Utagawa Kunisada (1786-1865) created portraits of beautiful women featuring lavish decoration and Kunisada's pupil Tsukioka Yoshitoshi (1839-1892) created precursors of the modern Japanese paintings of beautiful women.

CHAPTER 4
PEOPLE IN HIROSHIGE'S LANDSCAPES

Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849) and Utagawa Hiroshige (1797-1858) are the most famous landscape artists, but their styles are very different. Unlike the dynamic and striking landscapes created by Hokusai, Hiroshige's landscapes are charming and full of emotion. Through skillful depiction of human figures, Hiroshige's depictions of highway scenes are even more charming.

There are two main features of the depiction of human figures in Hiroshige's highway scenes. First, figures are viewed from behind. In Hiroshige's works, many of the figures are facing away from the viewer. Unable to guess the emotions of the figures in the picture, the viewer is forced to use their imagination. Viewers are encouraged to study the image more carefully as figures are portrayed ambiguously, a technique of the Hiroshige school. The inner thoughts of travelers who must continue their journey even amidst the heavy falling rain are implied in their bent backs.

The second defining characteristic of Hiroshige's highway scenes is that travelers and local townspeople are depicted side-by-side. Townspeople are depicted in their daily life; travelers are in an extra-ordinary world. These two groups shown in contrast highlights the travelers' feelings and heightens the emotions of travel.