

kunstmuseum basel

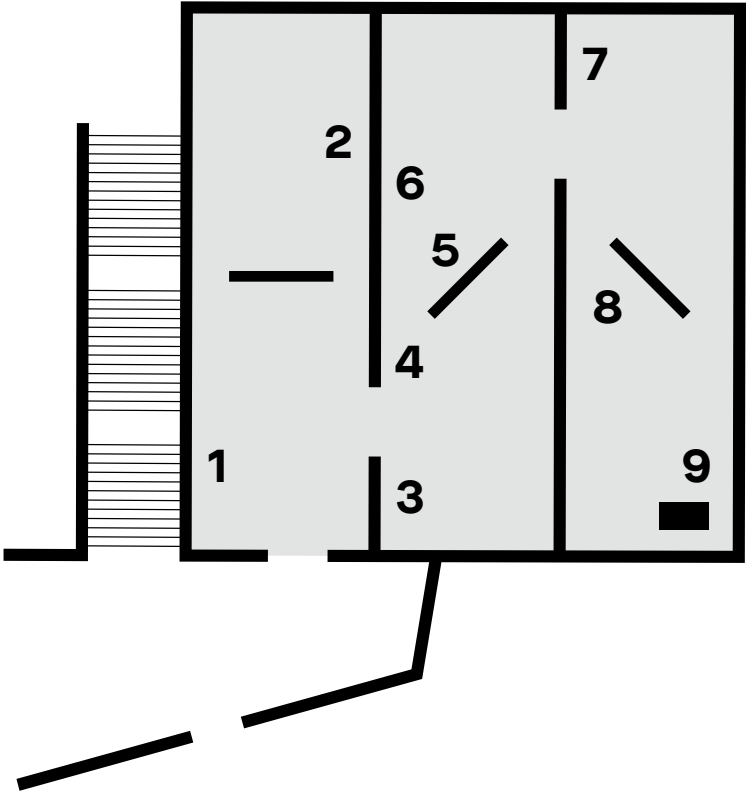
Made in Japan

Color Woodblock Prints
by Hiroshige, Kunisada
and Hokusai

The Kupferstichkabinett of the Kunstmuseum Basel has a superb collection of 18th- and 19th-century Japanese woodblock prints, being shown here for the first time. The majority come from the collection of Dr. Carl Mettler (1877–1942) — the Basel chemist who had been building up his collection of European and East Asian art since the 1920s and bequeathed it to the Kunstmuseum.

The exhibition explores the two major themes of Japanese woodblock prints: the depiction of landscape and the human figure. Works by artists both famous and lesser known in this country portray scenic landmarks, images of travel and everyday life, Kabuki actors, and beautiful people. These juxtapositions demonstrate how forms of expression and techniques changed over the course of time. The woodblock prints also reflect Japan's cultural and social history.

Kunstmuseum Basel | Neubau Lower level



1 On the Road

Views of the Japanese landscape first appeared in travel guidebooks and travel novels. Around the middle of the 18th century, they also began to be published as multi-colored prints outside of books. The motifs continued to include scenic landmarks and famous places, but they also drew on collections of motifs from poetry and literature. Many prints thus appeared in series, such as the iconic landscapes by the artists Hokusai and Hiroshige.

Shortly after the publication of Hokusai's "bestseller," *36 Views of Mount Fuji* (1830–32), Hiroshige drew the designs for the *53 Stations of the Tōkaidō* (1832–34) — the "East Sea Road" connecting the imperial city of Kyoto and the capital Edo (now Tokyo). The road was used for more than just the movement of goods and people between the cities. Countless adventurers undertook it for the sake of the journey and to travel to places of pilgrimage. Hiroshige's depictions of the *Tōkaidō*, at times idyllic and at times adventurous, served both as a memento and a foretaste.

2 In the City

When Edo (now Tokyo) replaced the imperial city of Kyoto as the seat of government, it ushered in a new era known as the Edo period (1603–1868). The growing city brought together a new demographic group — the burghers (*chōnin*), who worked in trade and commerce. The offerings of entertainment and culture grew with them, making the city an attraction. Visitors sought out Edo's temples and shrines for pilgrimages and religious festivals, and the sites were surrounded by amusements such as fairs and theaters as well as teahouses and restaurants.

The prints of the cityscapes form a pendant to the scenic landmarks of the provinces. They too were published in the form of series that brought together a selection of famous places (*meisho*). To the modern eye, some of the idyllic motifs may not seem particularly urban. However, they all depict attractions in the big city such as religious sites, vantage points, or entertainment districts.

3 Being Beautiful

The depiction of beautiful, mainly female, figures was a pictorial theme of enduring popularity. The genre known as *bijinga* (“beauties”) portrayed courtesans, i.e. high-ranking prostitutes, and geishas, who were sophisticated entertainers. Their attractive appearance and elaborate outfits were part of their professional staging. However, this subject also included lovers and female figures who embodied casually observed, everyday beauty.

Even where the names of the figures are indicated, the aim is not to create individual portraits, but rather represent a generalized ideal of beauty. The facial features, bodily proportions, and poses therefore reflect both a social norm and the artist’s interpretation of it. Such works were particularly appreciated, as the motif of the graceful *bijinga* and the manner of its depiction — for example, the elegant execution of the line — reinforce each other.

4 Prints in Everyday Life

Printed images were omnipresent in everyday life in Japan: book illustrations, posters, packaging, and advertising leaflets were also produced using the woodcut process and designed by the same artists as the color woodcuts. Inexpensive prints were often used as decoration and displayed on screens or, in a narrow vertical format, on posts.

Color woodblock prints had a variety of functions: They served as souvenirs, were issued for holidays, or depicted gods who promised good luck or warded off misfortune. They portrayed the deities of Buddhism, Shintoism, and other faiths that were part of everyday customs. The demon exorcist Shōki, for instance, was supposed to protect against evil powers and illness. Prints with this motif were thus often placed at the entrance of a house.

5 A Collaborative Product

Woodblock prints were usually produced in large editions with the object of commercial success. Although mass-produced, they were designed and printed with great sophistication. The process was based on a division of labor: a publisher developed the concept and sold the woodcuts, an artist drew the design, a woodcarver made the printing plates, and a printer put the motif on paper.

Woodblock prints are created using the relief printing method without a press: a sheet of paper is placed on the inked relief of the printing block and pressure is applied by rubbing it down. In early woodcuts, only the black lines were printed and the colored interior areas were done by hand. In the actual color woodblock printing process, contour lines and inner areas are printed in succession from different blocks, with all their patterns, color gradients and relief structures. Accordingly, not only the artistic design, but also the skill of the carver and the printer are of significance for the quality of the final result.

6 On the Stage

One of the most popular offerings in the cultural life of the Edo period was traditional Kabuki theater. Here, the actors not only recite lines, but also sing, dance, entertain with acrobatics, and even appear as ghosts and monsters. At the high points in the action, the actors freeze and, with a glaring gaze, hold the most expressive poses, known as *mie*.

Kabuki theater and woodblock prints were already closely linked in the 18th century and mutually beneficial: woodblock prints promoted plays, captured key scenes in multi-part compositions, and depicted the celebrated actors in the latest productions. They sold so briskly among the many theater fans, that they were printed hundreds of times over and artists such as Utagawa Kunisada were able to specialize in actor prints (*yakusha-e*).

7 Star Cult

Actors and courtesans had a very special status in the social order of the Edo period and they were revered as cult figures — so much so, that the government temporarily banned the depiction of actors in the 1840s. In vain: woodblock prints still continued to portray the actors, who could be recognized by their characteristic expressions and facial features even without their names. Other images suggested a glimpse behind the scenes and a view of the “bohemian life” of the stars. After their deaths, actors were honored one last time with memorial prints.

Actors in Japanese theater were exclusively male. The performers of female roles (*onnagata*) maintained their identification as female even off stage. This is indicated by the purple scarf worn over the shaved forehead.

8 Being a Hero

Depictions of heroes from history and legends gained popularity in the repertoire of woodblock prints at the end of the Edo period (1603–1868). The ban on actor prints in the 1840s caused designers and publishers of woodblock prints to shift to this theme in order to secure their livelihood. Many of the extravagant tales of honor and revenge were already being performed on stage. However, their content was also suitable for woodblock print series appearing under the label “history.”

Utagawa Kuniyoshi established a particularly expressive visual language for his heroic depictions. In the wake of his success, numerous artists also created series of heroic stories. Their bold coloration, dynamic composition, and texts or images within images are still referenced today in Manga comics and animated films.

9 The Origins of the Collection

The prints shown here were intended for the Japanese market. Most were produced before Japan entered into official trade relations with Western countries in 1854. From the late 19th century onwards, woodcuts were bought up by collectors in Europe in a wave of enthusiasm known as Japonisme.

Carl Mettler bought the majority of his color woodcuts probably as a single lot from a private collection in Geneva in the 1920s. The most valuable prints, dating from the 18th century, were however acquired by him individually — for instance in 1928 from the well-known collection of the Berlin collector Toni Straus-Negbaur (birth unknown–1942). She in turn had bought some of them from the legendary Parisian dealer Hayashi Tadamasa (1854–1906), as evidenced by the collector’s marks on the sheets. Western collectors initially preferred the works of the 18th century, with their muted color palette, to the brightly colored prints that were produced later. This preference has since shifted. Fortunately, Mettler took both into account.

UTAGAWA HIROSHIGE (1797–1858)

The legacy of Hiroshige lies primarily in his mastery of the *fūkeiga* landscape print genre. Born into a low-ranking Samurai family of firefighters in Edo, he passed the position he had inherited from his father to his son in 1823. Only then, he became a full-time woodblock print artist. He became famous in Edo, mostly due to his Tōkaidō landscape series, a theme on which he created twenty different series. His work, especially his last series *100 Views of Edo*, was enthusiastically received by western artists such as van Gogh and Monet.

KATSUSHIKA HOKUSAI (1760–1849)

One of the true creative geniuses of the Edo period, Hokusai initially learned his skills under Katsukawa Shunshō. Later, the influence of Kitao Shigemasa, Torii Kiyonaga, and others became apparent in his work: he may have been studying to accept the styles of other schools as well. He created an astounding 40,000 compositions during this long and productive lifetime, among them his *36 Views of Mount Fuji*, *100 Views of Mount Fuji*, and his Manga sketches stand out. The latter became one of the great early receptions among avantgarde artists of the late 19th century.

UTAGAWA KUNISADA (1786–1865)

A student of Utagawa Toyokuni I, who specialized in designing figures, both that of the kabuki theater (*yakusha-e*) and beautiful women (*bijinga*). Leading a large workshop, he is said to have produced more than 10,000 works. Large numbers of his actor prints exist in western collections. Kunisada collaborated with Hiroshige on a number of projects – he seems to have been someone with friends and connections. The taking on his master's name and naming himself Toyokuni II seems to have been a slight on the actual second generation Toyokuni, who died early. Kunisada was actually the third generation Toyokuni.

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