

## Fragments of the Kabuki World: Onnagata and Kitsune

The crowd roars in approval as an imposing actor clad in sumptuous robes and dramatic facial paint makes his way down the entrance platform to the stirring tempo of wooden clappers, striking poses as he goes. The scene unfolding is typical fare for Kabuki, a form of Japanese theater characterized by highly stylized visuals, rousing story lines, and enthusiastic audience interaction. In its heyday, Kabuki offered a dazzling world of epic heroics and red-light intrigue, elegant courtesans and brash playboys, arrogant samurai and tragic lovers.

Although Kabuki originated in performances by courtesans, the Japanese government later banned women from performing, spurring the convention of *onnagata*, male actors who played female roles using techniques carefully crafted and honed over years of tradition; they dressed, moved, and spoke like women. The fact that they were men did not detract from the viewing experience; the *onnagata* was a greatly respected facet of Kabuki.

In fact, many critics argued that *onnagata* were better able to portray women than women themselves. Furthermore, although initially influenced by women, eventually the *onnagata's* clothing and mannerisms began to be emulated by females. While some played men as often as women, others devoted themselves to *onnagata* roles, among them the masters of the Segawa Kikunojō and Iwai Hanshirō lines of actors.

The material Kabuki tapped came from a variety of sources. Scripts were peppered with references to altered historical accounts, folklore, myth, and superstition. The mystery of the supernatural made it a common source of plot material, with vengeful and sad ghosts, demons, deities and mythological creatures all taking the stage.

Among the occult themes, *kitsune* (fox spirits) in particular gained popularity during the Edo period (1603-1868) and frequently appeared in Kabuki Theater. These creatures were believed to have a variety of powers, including spirit possession, flight, and the ability to mimic human form and create mystical flames.

Sometimes a loyal but elusive trickster who protected virtuous beings, at other times the fox was an otherworldly mother forced to return to the wild or an evil seductress determined to destroy humanity. Fox spirits had key roles in many plays, such as the acclaimed *Yoshitsune and the Thousand Cherry Trees* (1748); however, the treatment of the *kitsune* remained as varied as the spirit's own history.

## **Gunki and Musha-e: Edo Visualizations of Japan's Warrior Past**

Japan has a rich and storied history of warriors and military exploits, recorded in annals and amplified by legend. Although the Edo period (1603-1868) was peaceful, war was a favorite topic of drama, literature, and art.

Kabuki plays frequently drew on tales of battles and famous warriors for their characters and plots, often contributing a reinterpretation of well-known incidents. They featured flashy sword fights with star actors thundering across the stage and striking dramatic, bold poses (*mie*). The puppet theater often performed similar plays, but took advantage of its non-human actors to enact dismemberments and decapitations.

There was no shortage of artists rendering famous battles and warriors of the past. Some of them portrayed scenes traditionally, as depicted in classical records and paintings, while others tried to provide a fresh interpretation of historical figures through the lens of the urban culture in which they lived.

Although Japan had experienced a prolonged civil war just prior to the beginning of the Edo period, the Tokugawa shogunal government banned portrayals of these events, considering them to be too recent and sensitive. Instead, authors, playwrights, and artists often turned to an earlier historical conflict, the Genpei War (1180-1185), for their settings. A large-scale civil war that had involved much of Japan, it was fought between the ruling Heike clan and the Genji clan (also called the Taira and the Minamoto respectively). The many dramatic battles and courageous acts of the samurai were recorded in works such as *The Tale of the Heike* and *The Rise and Fall of The Genji and Heike*, and the numerous legends about famous figures were preserved in works such as *The Chronicle of Yoshitsune* and *The Tale of Benkei*.

Artists and audiences were particularly interested in Minamoto no Yoshitsune (1159-1189), the young Genji general whose clever tactics and leadership won the war decisively for his clan. Despite, or perhaps because of, his dazzling military success, Yoshitsune incurred the wrath of his older brother (and head of the clan) Minamoto no Yoritomo, who accused Yoshitsune of being disobedient and accepting an imperial court title without his approval. He was forced to flee across the countryside with only a few of his most loyal warriors.

Yoshitsune eventually made his way north to Hiraizumi, where he sought refuge with Hidehira, the head of the powerful northern Fujiwara clan. When Hidehira died in 1187, his son Yasuhira gave in to Yoritomo's threat of annihilation and betrayed Yoshitsune, attacking him at the Battle of Koromo River and forcing him to commit ritual suicide along with his wife, daughter, and five-year-old son.

Tales of Yoshitsune's brilliant military career and his romantic flight from his conniving brother's search parties captured the imagination of the people of the Edo period. Even today the Japanese term for “sympathy for the underdog” or “sympathy for the tragic hero” is *hōgan-biiki*; *hōgan* (Lieutenant in the Imperial Police) is the title Yoshitsune received from the retired Emperor Go-Shirakawa, so the term literally means “sympathy for Yoshitsune.” He is the central figure of many of the most famous Kabuki and puppet plays, and the subject of the prints on display here.

**Torii Kiyomasu I (1690s to 1720s)**  
***The Onnagata Actor Nakamura Senya I***  
***in the Role of Tokonatsu, in the play***  
***Mitsudomoe Katoku-biraki***

Japan, Edo period, 1717

Hand-colored woodblock print

Gift of James A. Michener, 1988  
(20497)

Kiyomasu was a member of the prestigious Torii School of artists, who dominated the world of Kabuki graphics from the late 1600s to the late 1700s. Artists of the Torii School turned out all kinds of theatrical material, from posters to programs, but were perhaps best known for their “actor images,” such as this one. The Torii style was typically characterized by the thick, bold lines seen in this print.

Although little is known about the play or character represented in this image, the actor Nakamura Senya I (dates unknown) can be identified by the large crest prominently displayed on the sleeve of his kimono. In the Edo period, every family had its own crest, and in the realm of Kabuki an actor’s crest was frequently incorporated into his costume. A Kabuki fan’s ability to recognize various actors’ crests contributed to the relationship between actor and audience.

This print is one of the best extant examples of the older *tan-e* or “red painted” style, in which red or orange color is applied with a brush after the initial black and white printing.

**Torii Kiyonaga (1752-1815)**  
***Nakamura Rikō I as Tanba-ya Otsuma***  
***and Ichikawa Yaozō III as Furute-ya***  
***Hachirōbei***

Japan, Edo period, 1785

Full-color woodblock print

Gift of James A. Michener, 1972  
(16260)

Torii Kiyonaga was one of the most famous ukiyo-e artists of his generation and contributed significantly to the art of the full-color print, which used multiple blocks bearing separate ink colors to achieve a lively array of hues quite different from the “red painted” technique previously seen. Although Kiyonaga was primarily known for his prints of beautiful women, he inherited the task of being the premier Kabuki artist when he was named as the fourth-generation Torii representative after studying under Torii Kiyomitsu (1735-1785).

This print features the characters Otsuma and Hachirōbei from Sakurada Shisuke's play *Evening at Sakamachi Crossroads*, performed in Edo in 1785 at the Nakamura-za Theater. Otsuma is a courtesan who reluctantly dismisses her lover Hachirōbei for financial reasons despite her feelings for him. Hachirōbei is so angered by her dismissal that he comes to kill her, as depicted in this scene, but after the deed is done he discovers a note revealing her love, indicated here by the paper trailing at Otsuma's feet. Otsuma is played by the *onnagata* Nakamura Rikō I (1742-1786) and Hachirōbei by Ichikawa Yaozō III (1747-1818).

This image is one of Kiyonaga's many *degatari* prints, which show the musical accompaniment, consisting of a chanter and *shamisen* player, performing in a space beside the stage where they can be seen by the audience.



**Torii Kiyonaga (1752-1815)**

***Ichikawa Monnosuke II as Osome***

***and Ichikawa Komazō III as Hisamatsu***

Japan, Edo period, 1789

Full-color woodblock print

Gift of James A. Michener, 1991

(21571)

Depicted in this scene are the lovers Osome and Hisamatsu, popular characters whose story was used for many Kabuki and *jōruri* (puppet theater) plays. This particular print shows the story as recounted in Sakurada Shisuke's *Yukari no Hinagusa* (Bond of Nesting Grass), performed in Edo in 1789 at the Nakamura-za Theater. Osome is the daughter of a shop owner who takes on Hisamatsu as his apprentice, and the two fall in love. When Hisamatsu is betrothed to another, Osome resolves to kill herself but is later persuaded against doing so. Hisamatsu is shown wearing a trademark kimono and obi dyed with a striped pattern derived from a technique using bamboo slats, while Osome's attire typically consists of long sleeves and a trailing obi, a style reserved for unmarried women. Osome is among the more renowned of the *musume* (young maiden) roles, one of the many *onnagata* archetypes.

Playing the roles of Osome and Hisamatsu are Ichikawa Monnosuke I (1743-1794) and Ichikawa Komazō III (1764-1838), respectively; they can both be identified by the crest of concentric squares seen on their costumes, indicative of the Ichikawa line of actors. Monnosuke was the disciple of Ichikawa Danjūrō IV, a member of the most famous line of actors in the history of Kabuki.

**Utagawa Toyokuni I (1769-1825)**  
***Yamato-ya Iwai Hanshirō IV as Kikusui,***  
**from the series *Images of Actors Onstage***

Japan, Edo period, 1794

Full-color woodblock print

Purchase, 1953

(13252)

Utagawa Toyokuni followed Torii Kiyonaga as the most prominent Kabuki artist in the late 1700s and early 1800s, and the Utagawa style came to dominate the theatrical print world from his time onward.

The character featured here is Kikusui, the wife of the renowned warrior Kusunoki Masashige. When her husband dies at the hands of enemy forces, she physically stops her despairing son from killing himself by blocking his attempts with a halberd, telling him that they both must live on in grief rather than commit suicide. Her black mourning veil, somber attire, and grave expression suggest that she is doing just that in this image.

This print comes from the series *Images of Actors Onstage*, as indicated by the writing in the upper right corner. Kikusui is shown as played by the esteemed *onnagata* Iwai Hanshirō IV (1747-1800). Although this line of actors had had a strong presence in Kabuki since the time of Iwai Hanshirō I, it was Hanshirō IV who began its tradition of specializing as *onnagata*. He rivaled Segawa Kikunojō III as the most popular *onnagata* of the age and was well known for playing lower-class women, another *onnagata* archetype that came to the fore around the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

This print shows the development of realism in ukiyo-e; Hanshiro IV was described as having a round, full-cheeked face, features which are adequately represented in this print.

**Utagawa Kunimasa I (1773-1810)**  
***The Onnagata Actor Nakamura Noshiō II***  
***as Gotobei's wife Sekijo,***  
**in the play *Kaeribana Yuki no Yoshitsune***

Japan, Edo period, 1795

Full-color woodblock print

Gift of James A. Michener, 1991

(21754)

This print depicts Nakamura Noshiō II in the role of Sekijo in the play *Kaeribana yuki no Yoshitsune* (Yoshitsune of the Snow in Second Bloom), performed in Edo in 1795 as part of the Miyako-za Theater's annual *kaomise*, or "face-showing," event in which the troupe's new actors were presented to the public.

Sekijo is the wife of Gotobei, a skilled tactician with an unfortunate weakness for alcohol who is tricked by conspirators into overindulging in front of his would-be captain—the renowned Yoshitsune of *Tale of the Heike* fame—and disgracing himself. When Sekijo hears of this, she angrily decides to procure a letter of divorce, but when Gotobei later proves himself to Yoshitsune and earns respect, she regrets her hasty actions and suggests remarriage. Sekijo's daughter is ashamed of her mother's foolishness and kills herself after admonishing Sekijo for her impudence. Chastened by her daughter's suicide, Sekijo sets out on a mission to rescue her stepson from Kamakura, rifle in her hands. The role of Sekijo is one of the “devoted wife” roles traditionally assigned to middle-aged *onnagata*.

Sekijo's attire comprises a number of traditional wedding garments, including an *uchikake*, a kimono worn over the wedding robe during the reception, and a *tsunokakushi*, a headcloth that symbolically covers a woman's “horns of jealousy” and demonstrates her willingness to be a faithful and obedient wife.

## **Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1797-1861)**

### ***Foxes Practicing the Art of Shape-shifting***

Japan, Edo period, ca. 1840s

Woodblock print; ink and color on paper

Gift of James A. Michener, 1959

(14404)

A member of the prominent Utagawa School of woodblock artists, Kuniyoshi gained acclaim with his intricately detailed and dynamic *musha-e* (warrior prints). However, never one to be pigeonholed, he also tried his hand at landscape compositions along with experimental works such as the one seen here. In this print he abandons his trademark tightly focused style for a more spacious composition. Among the sleek bodies of the foxes one can still catch a glimmer of Utagawa's mastery of detail in the kimono patterns of the creatures.

Within Japanese folklore no creature embodies the same mix of contradictions that can be found in the fox spirit. Servant of the goddess Inari, destructive trickster or benevolent defender of good, the fox spirit's role in myth is as fluid as the sinuous lines of its form. Among the great magical powers of foxes, one of the most commonly wielded is the ability to mimic human appearance.

Here we see a group practicing this skill. While some sit by a fire in intricate kimono and others engage in small talk, two foxes near the river stack reeds on their heads, a necessary preparation for shape-shifting. Elsewhere in the print one can see foxes that have already succeeded at their task, parading about as young women or monks. Foxes disguised as humans are commonly found in Kabuki. Some of them, such as the famous Genkurō and Kuzunoha, move beyond novelty into key roles in their respective plays, *Yoshitsune and the Thousand Cherry Trees* and *A Courtly Mirror of Ashiya Dōman*.



**Torii Kiyonobu II (1720-1752)**

***The Onnagata Actor Segawa Kikunojō I  
as the Courtesan Kuzunoha***

Japan, Edo period, ca. 1737

Woodblock print; ink and color on paper

Gift of James A. Michener, 1991

(21660)

Like the other members of the Torii School, Kiyonobu II focused on advertisements and other images for Kabuki theaters. The glossy black coloring on the robe, hair, and crests utilizes a technique known as *urushi-e*, or “lacquer painting.” This effect was achieved by mixing animal-based glue with black ink, causing the final product to have a lustrous shine resembling lacquer. As was common in conjunction with the *urushi-e* style, mica or bronze powder was sprinkled on certain sections of the print (here seen on the robe) to create a dramatic juxtaposition with the deep black and add a luxurious quality to the work.

Once again we find the fox spirit Kuzunoha soon after her transformation, a replica of the real Kuzunoha's bamboo cane in hand. The odd device in the lower left, baited with a dead mouse, is one of the fox traps originally set to ensnare her. Kuzunoha glances back at it with disinterest as she, now a woman, begins her new life as Yasuna's wife.

Here the fox spirit is portrayed by Segawa Kikunojō I (1693-1749), an actor who specialized in *onnagata* roles. Even among his peers Kikunojō was considered a master, his commitment to the craft extending into his private life where he lived as a woman.

**Toyohara Kunichika (1835-1900)**  
***The Fox Spirit Kusunoha*, from the series**  
***One Hundred Roles***  
***of Ichikawa Danjūrō IX***

Japan, Meiji Period (1868-1912), ca. 1898

Woodblock print; ink and color on paper

Gift of James A. Michener, 1999

(26542)

Like *The Fox Spirit Tadanobu* by Kunichika on display nearby, this work showcases the artist's talent for actor portraiture. As in Kunichika's depiction of Tadanobu, which is from the same series, deep red is used with precision to create eye-catching accents. The cluster of leaves in the upper left corner alludes to the meaning of the character's name, Kusunoha, or "kudzu leaves."

Found in the Kabuki play *A Courtly Mirror of Ashiya Dōman*, first staged in 1735, the story of the fox spirit Kusunoha is one of the numerous tales involving animal wives in Japanese mythology. Like Genkurō, this fox strives to repay generosity. A young man, Abe no Yasuna, releases a fox from a hunter's net only to be accused afterwards of disloyalty to his lord. As he is about to kill himself, the freed fox takes the shape of his beloved, Kusunoha, in order to stop him. It is this moment that the artist has captured.

The mystical white fox conjures many of Kuzunoha's possessions including the bamboo pole and sedge hat seen here in order to convince Yasuna of her identity. The motivation changes from repayment to love as the fox spirit marries Yasuna and bears him a son, while still mimicking Kuzunoha's form. The family's happiness cannot last, however, as the real Kuzunoha reappears. With a tearful farewell, the fox spirit returns to her forest, leaving her husband and young son behind.

**Toyohara Kunichika (1835-1900)**  
***The Fox Spirit Tadanobu, from the series***  
***One Hundred Roles***  
***of Ichikawa Danjūrō IX***

Japan, Meiji period (1868-1912), ca. 1898

Woodblock print; ink and color on paper

Gift of James A. Michener, 1999

(26551)

Unlike many of his contemporaries, Kunichika focused almost exclusively on portraits of Kabuki actors in his later work. This print is no exception. The vibrant red on the drum and subject's lips and the flash of deep purple in the robe lining are hallmarks of his careful but exquisite use of color.

In the celebrated Kabuki play *Yoshitsune and the Thousand Cherry Trees*, first staged in 1748, deception and loyalty run hand-in-hand in the role of the fox spirit Genkurō, pictured here. Using the magic of his kind, Genkurō disguises himself as Minamoto no Yoshitsune's loyal retainer Satō Tadanobu. Soon the ruse is exposed and the fox spirit's motivations come to light: the mystical drum called Hatsune that Yoshitsune carries, as seen in the subject's right hand, was created from the hides of Genkurō's parents. The fox spirit has tracked it down and impersonated Tadanobu in order to be close to it and fulfill his filial obligations.

Hearing his story, Yoshitsune and his love Shizuka decide to grant Genkurō the drum and relieve his pain. His quest completed, the fox spirit exits the stage in grand style. However, he is not one to forget generosity. When Yoshitsune and the real Tadanobu are besieged, the fox returns, lending his powers to their cause in a climactic final battle scene under the blossoming cherry trees (seen in the background).

## Sukeroku & Kabuki-themed Ukiyo-e

Though artists in many cultures draw inspiration from literature as a creative outlet, ukiyo-e printmakers of the Edo period were especially fortunate to have Kabuki's lively, colorful performances to use in their art. This selection of prints (as well as *Ichikawa Danjūrō V as Ikyū*, *Nakamura Rikō I as Agemaki*, and *Ichikawa Yaozō III as Sukeroku*, on display in the Robert F. Lange Gallery nearby) focuses on the immensely popular play *Sukeroku: The Flower of Edo* to celebrate the close relationship between the visual medium of ukiyo-e and the dynamism of the Kabuki stage.

Even before its initial production in 1713, the Sukeroku story was well known to Edo-period audiences. It was based upon the *Soga Monogatari* (Tale of the Soga Brothers), a saga of revenge from the 12<sup>th</sup> century in which two brothers seek retribution for their father's murder. Though the basic plot was heavily adapted for the stage and reinterpreted into the world of 17<sup>th</sup> century Japan, savvy theatre-goers would instantly recognize characters such as Sukeroku and Ikyū as their *Soga Monogatari* counterparts. The play's effectiveness depends on this, as much of the dramatic tension created throughout the performance is based upon the clash of class values between the samurai and Edo's "middle class" commoners.

Soga Gorō disguises himself as Sukeroku, a champion of the common man, who frequently visits the pleasure quarters to provoke fights with those he meets in hopes of catching a glimpse of his father's sword, which he eventually finds in the hands of Ikyū. Beyond his other exploits, it is Sukeroku's devotion to avenging his father that makes him such a celebrated character.

These prints, many of which also highlight specific actors, have been selected to illustrate *Sukeroku's* significance in Edo culture, as well as to give the viewer a sense of how artists of the Edo period interpreted and venerated the performances and characters they saw on the Kabuki stage. Though none of these prints may be as well known as Hokusai's great landscapes, they are a critical element of the ukiyo-e tradition and a vital connection between literature and art.



**Katsukawa Shunkō (1743-1812)**  
***Ichikawa Danjūrō V as Ikyū,***  
***Nakamura Rikō I as Agemaki and***  
***Ichikawa Yazoō III as Sukeroku***

Japan, Edo period, 1784

Woodblock print; ink and color on paper

Gift of James A. Michener, 1991

(21784)

As a pupil of Katsukawa Shunshō and a member of the Katsukawa School of printmaking, it is no surprise that Shunkō specialized in *yakusha-e*, or “likeness prints” of Kabuki actors. Many of his prints are considered to be equal to those of his master Shunshō, the pioneer of *yakusha-e*. (For a closer comparison, see *The Onnagata Actor Nakamura Rikō I as Agemaki with Two Attendants*, on view in the Japan Gallery.) In the late 1780s, the artist lost the use of his right arm, leading to the creation of his own distinctive style—a “close-up” portrait style known as *ōkubi-e* (large head pictures).

In this print, Shunkō has portrayed three famous Kabuki actors as *Sukeroku*'s main characters, Sukeroku, Agemaki, and Ikyū. The play, loosely based upon the events described in the *Soga Monogatari*, or *Tale of the Soga Brothers*, is a reinterpretation of a revenge story well known to Edo-period audiences, in which two brothers seek retribution for their father's murder. Sukeroku would be easily recognized as the samurai Soga Gorō, one of the brothers disguised as a commoner.

The villain, Ikyū, would also be recognizable as the samurai responsible for the murder of the brothers' father in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. The artist's use of color, especially in the kimono patterns, shows his intense attention to detail. Sukeroku is seen holding his signature umbrella, a symbol added in the 1716 production by Ichikawa Danjūrō II, the "original" Sukeroku, to give the play a "softer" style. If one looks closely, the artist's signature can be seen towards the bottom of each panel, close to each character's body.

## Utagawa Toyokuni I (1769-1825)

### *Ichikawa Omezō I as Sukeroku*

Japan, Edo period, 1805

Woodblock print; ink and color on paper

Gift of James A. Michener, 1991

(21808)

Toyokuni's depiction of Ichikawa Omezō I as Sukeroku represents a prime example of a *yakusha-e* print, created to celebrate the likeness of the actor whom it depicts. Toyokuni's artistic career followed an unusual path, as he originally studied under Utagawa Toyoharu, an artist who focused primarily on landscape prints. His *yakusha-e* style was well known and often emulated by other artists during the late Edo period.

This print depicts a very colorful Sukeroku, complete with his signature purple *hachimaki* (headband). It has been included by the artist to symbolize love. Sukeroku, the disguised samurai Soga Gorō, intentionally provokes the samurai he meets in the pleasure quarters to draw their swords and fight. In this way, he hopes to catch a glimpse of Tomokirimaru, the blade that belonged to his murdered father. Eventually, the hero discovers that it is in the possession of the powerful samurai Ikyū, also in disguise. The two reveal their true identities moments before a climactic duel. The artist's use of vibrant colors adds to the actor's striking pose and shows the advancement of printing technology in the late Edo period, as many different colors are used to detail the print.

**Torii Kiyomasu I (fl. ca. 1696-1716)**  
***Agemaki's Sukeroku: Ichikawa Danjūrō II***  
***as Sukeroku***  
***and Nakamura Takesaburō I as Agemaki***

Japan, Edo period, 1716

Woodblock print

Gift of James A. Michener, 1957  
(13988)

Before the introduction of *nishiki-e* (full color prints) in the middle of the 18th century, *ukiyo-e* artists toiled to create detailed prints that captured the colorful spectacle of Kabuki using only black and white. The Torii School, famous for its depictions of Kabuki actors, worked on playbills for Kabuki performances as well as prints capturing dramatic scenes or famous actors. Though Kiyomasu I may have been the son of Torii Kiyonobu I, the founder of the Torii School, his genealogy remains a point of contention in scholarly circles. He was quite prolific, but left many works unsigned.

This print, created about three years after the first Edo performance of *Sukeroku* in 1713, showcases Ichikawa Danjūrō II as Sukeroku. The role was written expressly for Danjūrō II, who was one of the most popular Kabuki actors at the time. Nakamura Takesaburō I is also shown here as the courtesan Agemaki, Sukeroku's love interest. The third figure is most likely one of her many attendants, left unnamed by the artist.

Both Danjūrō II and Takesaburō I were undoubtedly favorite subjects of Kiyomasu I, as they are featured in a plethora of different prints inspired by various plays throughout the artist's career. Though the print may be lacking in color, the wealth of detail shown makes all three characters stand out prominently, just as the actors would on a Kabuki stage.

**Katsukawa Shunshō (1726-1792)**  
***The Onnagata Actor Nakamura Rikō I as***  
***Agemaki with Two Attendants***

Japan, Edo period, 1782

Woodblock print; ink and color on paper

Gift of James A. Michener, 1957

(14038)

Shunshō, founder of the Katsukawa School of printmaking, was best known for his depictions of beautiful female figures and his pioneering work in creating *yakusha-e*. Though the Torii School may have been more popular at the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, many Torii pupils were won over by the Katsukawa School's focus on the creation of more true-to-life works.

In this print, actor Nakamura Rikō I is Agemaki, Sukeroku's lover and Edo's most famous courtesan. Not only has she pledged her love to the hero, but she is also one of the few who know his true identity and mission of vengeance at the onset of the play. She is so devoted to Sukeroku that she even attempts to convince his mother that her son has not forgotten his father in one of the play's more dramatic scenes. Sukeroku's deep sense of filial piety would certainly be seen as a samurai virtue by Edo audiences; as such, it creates an interesting dichotomy by which Sukeroku, the "commoner," enacts these values. Agemaki's character increases the tension between Sukeroku and Ikyū, who vainly clamors for her affections.

In typical Katsukawa fashion, this print focuses the viewer's attention on each of the characters displayed through stunning use of color and detail, especially in the various layers of Agemaki's kimono. Shunshō's signature and the censor's seal can be seen in the lower right-hand corner of the print.

## **Kitagawa Utamaro (1753-1806)**

### ***Agemaki and Sukeroku***

Japan, Edo period, ca. 1800

Woodblock print; ink and color on paper

Gift of James A. Michener, 1991

(23688)

One of Japan's most famous ukiyo-e artists, Utamaro is best known for his depiction of female figures. The artist would have considered *Sukeroku* to be excellent source material, given the play's abundance of female characters and immense popularity, though it had been almost ninety years since the play was first performed in 1713. In this print, Utamaro has given the viewer a depiction of Agemaki and Sukeroku in mid-scene. This print was made during the Kansei Era (1789-1801), which is considered by many to be the height of Utamaro's artistic career.

Here, Sukeroku has accepted a pipe from Agemaki, a convention of pleasure quarter etiquette that the play's audience would instantly recognize as a sign of affection. It is interesting to note that though Sukeroku is wearing a headband, it is not the signature purple *hachimaki* for which he is known. (This could simply be a limitation of the colors used by the artist.)



Though the print is not as colorful as many that appeared later in the Edo period, the artist's attention to detail can be seen in the individual marks used to create each character's hair, as well as the thin lines used to detail clothing and other accessories. The careful contrast of colors makes the black tones appear exceptionally striking. The character's names are written in the upper left-hand corner of the work, and further down the side, the artist's signature and the censor's seal are clearly visible.

**Toyohara Kunichika (1835-1900)**  
***Hanakawado Sukeroku, from the series***  
***One Hundred Roles of Ichikawa Danjūrō***

Japan, Meiji period, 1897

Woodblock print; ink and color on paper

Gift of James A. Michener, 1999

(26540)

Though the Edo period ended with the Meiji Restoration in 1868, artists such as Kunichika continued to produce brilliantly colorful woodblock prints. The popularity of this artist's work is proof that Japan's rich Kabuki and ukiyo-e traditions were not lost amidst the nation's push for modernization in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. This print is a depiction of Danjūrō IX as Sukeroku, one of his family's signature roles. Using wonderfully bold colors, the artist references an amusing scene from the play by showing Sukeroku carrying a large number of pipes.

Before Sukeroku and Ikyū first meet, the courtesans of the pleasure quarters crowd around the hero to offer him their pipes, signaling their affection for him. Once Ikyū arrives, he is displeased that there is no one left to offer him a pipe as well. Sukeroku mockingly offers one of the pipes he has collected to Ikyū using his foot in an attempt to provoke a confrontation. This print also depicts Sukeroku's famous purple headband. The poem at the top of the print emphasizes this fact, and simultaneously celebrates Danjūrō IX's tremendous influence on the portrayal of Sukeroku.

Though the role is known as one for younger actors, the poem suggests that, like the distinctive purple headband, there is no equal to Danjūrō IX's performance and ability. Kunichika's signature can be seen along the middle of the left-hand side of the print, and the series title is embellished with flowers in the upper-right hand corner.

## Utawaga Toyokuni III (Utawaga Kunisada)

(1786-1864)

### *Ushiwakamaru and Benkei*

Japan, Edo period (1615-1868)

Woodblock print; ink and color on paper

Gift of Victor S.K. Houston

in honor of his wife Pinao, 1941

(11640.7)

Musashibō Benkei is well known as the loyal right-hand man of the famous general Minamoto no Yoshitsune (1159-1189), whose leadership and strategies played a large role in the Minamoto clan's victory over the Taira clan in the Genpei civil war. Although little is known about the historical Benkei aside from a few brief mentions of his name, as a literary character and cultural fixture he has been gradually memorialized through centuries of stories, legends, literature and art, and is featured in many Kabuki plays.

Benkei was a Buddhist monk who turned to a life of banditry. In the famous scene depicted here, he attacks a young Yoshitsune in Kyoto, where he was known by his childhood name of Ushiwaka. However, Yoshitsune defeats Benkei using a mystical technique that allows him to float in the air. After his defeat, Benkei swears to devote his life to Yoshitsune's service and remains his trusted retainer until both perish at the hands of Yoshitsune's brother.

Although the print does not depict particular actors, both characters are striking a Kabuki *mie* (bold pose) and Benkei is wearing the face paint of a Kabuki actor.

**Utagawa Hiroshige (1797-1858)**  
***Oniwaka Fighting a Giant Carp, from the series *The Life of Yoshitsune****

Japan, Edo period (1615-1868)

Woodblock print; ink and color on paper

Gift of James A. Michener, 1991

(22116)

Benkei was born a giant and possessed superhuman strength. With this strength came a combative disposition, and as a child Benkei became a bully. He was sent off to a Buddhist temple where he trained as a monk, until a fight with a fellow acolyte forced him to leave. On his own, Benkei fell into a life of banditry, which would eventually lead to his fateful encounter with Yoshitsune.

Among the many legends of Benkei's feats of strength, the most famous is probably the scene depicted here, where a young Benkei wrestles a giant carp out of a river. This fight is said to have occurred in Benkei's youth, when he was known as Oniwaka. Although in this print Hiroshige presents Benkei as older than in most depictions of this scene, his full head of hair shows that he has not yet been sent to the temple, where he would have assumed the shaved head of a Buddhist monk.

**Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1797-1861)**  
***Yoshitsune and Heike Goblins, from the series Scenes in the Life of Minamoto no Yoshitsune***

Japan, Edo period (1615-1868)

Woodblock print; ink and color on paper

Gift of James A. Michener, 1991

(28198)

After leading the Genji clan to victory over the Heike, Yoshitsune was held in considerable esteem by his generals and wielded significant political power. His brother Yoritomo, the head of the Genji clan, feared Yoshitsune would lead a rebellion against him, and ordered him killed. Yoshitsune was forced to flee the capital in Kyoto with just a handful of retainers and seek shelter from loyal friends.

In the scene depicted here, Yoshitsune and his retainers try to flee from his brother's assassins by boat across the strait at Daimotsu no Ura near present-day Osaka, but are blocked by a fierce storm. Yoshitsune had won the final, decisive battle of the Genpei war in the strait of Dan no Ura, and many Heike warriors drowned in its waters. Now, as Yoshitsune tries to escape by boat, ghosts of the drowned Heike warriors try to take their revenge during the storm.

Benkei, who in many ways has become the central figure of the Yoshitsune story by this point, is able to draw on his training as a monk to say prayers that ward off the ghostly horde. Among Benkei's defining features are his quick wit and his mastery of many skills, military, religious and literary, which allow him to respond effectively to any situation, even when his master loses hope or is incapable of responding appropriately, as shown in this scene. He is often depicted with a multitude of tools on his back, symbolizing his numerous skills and tricks (see also *Ushiwakamaru and Benkei* on display nearby).

Some of the ghosts are depicted as crabs, a reference to a species of crab known as *heikegani* (*Heikea japonica*), which to this day live in the waters of Dan no Ura and have patterns on their shells resembling human faces. They are said to be reincarnations of the Heike warriors who died there. The use of black ink to depict the roiling, stormy sea is quite distinctive. Also of note is the wood grain, visible in the sky.

## Suzuki Harunobu (1725-1770)

### *Hallway Sumo*

Japan, Edo period (1615-1868)

Woodblock print; ink and color on paper

Gift of James A. Michener, 1957

(14045)

Harunobu is well known for his charming domestic portrayals. At first glance, this print seems to depict just such a scene, but scholars have suggested that this is in fact a parody of Yoshitsune and Benkei's fateful fight in Kyoto (see *Ushiwakamaru and Benkei* and *Gojō Bridge in Kyoto where Benkei Killed a Thousand People* on display nearby).

Parody was a central feature of Edo culture, and although Benkei as a character in drama, literature and art was frequently used to satirize the samurai, he was not immune from being a target of that parody himself. In this example of *mitate*, or parody through intentional visual confusion, a fight between two children is purposely "confused" with the fight between Yoshitsune and Benkei, reframing their famous battle as a childish squabble.

The verandah with the handrail here is visually substituted for the Gojō Bridge, the plum blossoms in the background are associated with the Tenjin shrine near the bridge that Yoshitsune visited, and other visual clues create links to Yoshitsune and Benkei for an informed viewer of the time. The standing child, Yoshitsune, is performing a Kabuki-style *mie* (bold pose), reminiscent of theatrical depictions of warrior tales.



Harunobu is known for his trademark slender figures. His style is far better suited to depicting refined courtesans in the pleasure quarters than warrior scenes, and only a handful of warrior prints are attributed to him, but here he exploits the potential of the *mitate* technique to treat a historical and martial theme in his characteristic mode.

**Utagawa Hiroshige (1797-1858)**  
***Gojō Bridge in Kyoto where Benkei Killed  
a Thousand People from the Series The  
Story of Ushiwaka (Yoshitsune)***

Japan, Edo period (1615-1868)

Woodblock print; ink and color on paper

Gift of James A. Michener

(22479)

This print provides another depiction of the battle between the famous general Yoshitsune and the warrior monk Benkei, who would become his most loyal retainer (see also *Ushiwakamaru and Benkei* on display nearby). Benkei famously resolved to defeat one thousand samurai of the ruling Heike clan and steal their swords, and succeeded in killing nine hundred and ninety nine on Gojō Bridge in the capital city of Kyoto before encountering the young Yoshitsune, who defeated him and took him into his service.

In this legend Benkei is imagined as a commoner and gruff ruffian who is able to best decadent samurai at their own game. This characterization made him a popular figure among the urban commoners of the Edo period. Benkei frequently appeared in Kabuki plays as an *aragoto*, or "rough" character, who flouted samurai power and authority.

He is the star of one of the eighteen greatest Kabuki plays of all time, *Kanjinchō*, in which he beats his own master, Yoshitsune, disguised as an apprentice monk, at a road checkpoint (see also *Kanjinchō* on display nearby). Since Benkei was a commoner and Yoshitsune was a samurai, this action flagrantly violated the strictures of the feudal caste system. That scene, Benkei's defeat of many samurai on Gojō Bridge, and other portrayals of him transcending his caste and station perhaps help explain the enduring fascination with him.

This print depicts Gojō bridge in Kyoto, upon which, according to some legends, the fight occurred. Hiroshige, known more for his landscapes than action prints, portrays Benkei sneaking up on Yoshitsune rather than fighting him, a technique that allows him to not only avoid depicting any vigorous action, but also to pull back the perspective of the scene and focus on the background landscape, which is the center of the composition.

**Torii Kiyomitsu I (1735-1785)**  
***Bandō Hikosaburō II as Hōgan***  
***Yoshitsune***

Japan, Edo period, 1761

Woodblock print; ink and color on paper

Gift of James A. Michener, 1959

(14526)

Torii Kiyomitsu I was one of the most prominent ukiyo-e artists prior to Harunobu. Like the other artists of the Torii School, he specialized in *yakusha-e* (actor prints) and *bijin-ga* (prints depicting beautiful women). His prints are usually accompanied by a poem.

This print depicts the Kabuki actor Bandō Hikosaburō II, who appeared as Hōgan Yoshitsune in the 1761 Ichimura-za production of the Kabuki play *Waka Musha Kokyō no Nishiki* (The Glorious Homecoming of a Young Warrior). The title of the play is given in the inscription along with the verse:

*Uguisu no / Amairu ume ya / Anija hito* (My elder brother is a plum to which the warblers flock).

With his arms outstretched and his head swung to the side, Hikosaburō strikes a *mie*, a highly theatrical pose performed by Kabuki actors, which is brilliantly captured by the artist. Despite being one of the greatest military heroes in Japanese history, Minamoto no Yoshitsune is portrayed as a pale youth with beautiful, feminine features including dazzlingly white skin and thinly penciled brows, rather than as a sturdy warrior—an image consistent with the descriptions in *Gikeiki* (The Chronicle of Yoshitsune), which compares Yoshitsune to the renowned Chinese beauty Yang Guifei.

This is an example of a two-color print, a transitional stage in the development of full-color *nishiki-e* prints that was happening around this time. Kiyomitsu primarily used this technique to produce “primitive” style ukiyo-e, usually pink and green, occasionally with the addition of another color.

**Toyohara Kunichika (1835-1900)**  
***Kanjinchō*, from the series *One Hundred Roles of Ichikawa Danjūrō***

Japan, Meiji period, 1893

Woodblock print; ink and color on paper

Gift of James A. Michener, 1999

(26498)

*Kanjinchō*, a drama inspired by the Yoshitsune legends, is one of eighteen celebrated Kabuki plays. It evoked deep sympathy from the audience and helped immortalize Yoshitsune as one of the most beloved tragic heroes in Japanese history.

Fleeing the manhunt ordered by his brother Yoritomo, Yoshitsune, accompanied by a handful of followers disguised as *yamabushi* (mountain priests), reaches the Ataka Barrier, only to be recognized by the barrier keeper, Togashi. In one of the most dramatic moments of the play, Benkei snatches Yoshitsune's staff and furiously beats his master in order to allay Togashi's suspicion.

In a classic example of the Kabuki theme of *giri* (sense of duty) in conflict with *ninjō* (human sympathy), Togashi, deeply moved by Benkei's loyalty and agony, lets the party cross the barrier and offers wine to the wounded Yoshitsune, perfectly aware of the consequences of defying Yoritomo's order.

After they have safely crossed the barrier, there is an emotional scene in which Benkei tearfully begs his master's forgiveness. Yoshitsune, also weeping, thanks Benkei and laments his tragic fate.

In this print, Kunichika vividly portrays the famous Kabuki actor Ichikawa Danj ūrō IX (1839-1903) in the role of Benkei, recognizable here by his small black cap and the checkered pattern on his robe.

## **Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1797-1861)**

### ***Letter Written by Yoshitsune at Koshigoe***

Japan, Edo period (1615-1868)

Woodblock print; ink and color on paper

Gift of Victor S.K. Houston in honor of his wife,

Pinao, 1941

(11641.21)

Kuniyoshi was a celebrated artist best known for his *musha-e* (warrior prints), including his portrayal of the forty-seven loyal retainers in *Ch ūshingura*. By the time of his death, he had completely altered the balance of subject matter in the art of ukiyo-e, establishing warrior prints as a respectable genre whose popularity rivaled that of prints portraying Kabuki actors and courtesans.

The famous “Koshigoe letter,” depicted here, represents the turning point in Yoshitsune’s career. Despite his heroism, which helped crush the Heike in three major battles, and his repeated oaths of allegiance to his lord and elder brother Yoritomo, Yoritomo feared Yoshitsune as a potential rival and denied him entry into the Minamoto clan headquarters at Kamakura. The “Koshigoe letter” was Yoshitsune’s final plea to Yoritomo for understanding and is so heart-wrenching that, according to the account in *Gikeiki*, it drew tears from Yoritomo, although he had already set his mind on eliminating his younger brother.



Yoshitsune's loyal retainer Benkei is seen reading the letter in the central panel of this triptych, with Yoshitsune looking on to his right. In the letter, written in the classical Chinese used for formal documents, Yoshitsune reiterates his loyalty to Yoritomo and speaks of the pain of being rejected, although he has risked his life charging his horse down precipitous cliffs in a surprise attack against the Heike at Ichinotani, and braving the perils of wind and wave in subsequent sea battles.

**Utagawa Hiroshige (1797-1858)**  
**Chapter 2: Ushiwakamaru (Yoshitsune)**  
**Training at a Waterfall, from the series**  
***The Life of Yoshitsune***

Japan, Edo period, 1856

Woodblock print; ink and color on paper

Gift of James A. Michener, 1991

(22115)

Although Hiroshige is an artist best known for his landscape prints, most notably his many series depicting the *Fifty-Three Stations of the Tōkaidō*, here he deals with a historical theme.

This print depicts Yoshitsune, then aged 13 and still known by his childhood name, Ushiwakamaru, training at a waterfall in the wild, mountainous region of Kurama. According to legends described in the Noh play *Kurama tengu*, Yoshitsune received instruction in the secret arts of swordsmanship and military tactics from Sōjōbō, the mythical king of the *tengu* (goblins). The secret transmission of a jealously guarded art or skill, such as poetry or the martial arts, was a common practice in medieval Japan.

Ushiwakamaru is portrayed in the foreground, set against the cedar forests of the thickly wooded Kurama Mountains. Hiroshige employs the technique of linear perspective, which adds a suggestion of depth and mystery to the mythical landscape. The color of the waterfall reflects the artist's characteristic preference for the indigo shade sometimes called "Hiroshige blue."

Hiroshige's prints are highly admired for their technical quality and especially noted for their unusual style and the use of striking colors, which greatly influenced Western artists such as Van Gogh and Monet.