

Warriors, Maidens, and Foxes: Kabuki in Japanese Woodblock Prints

Since its inception, ukiyo-e, the art of the Floating World, was intimately connected with Kabuki Theatre. Beginning in the early 1600s as a new style of dramatic performance revolutionized by the Shinto priestess Izumo no Okuni, who drew crowds to watch her dance in the riverbeds of Kyoto, Kabuki quickly gained in popularity, becoming the dominant form of theater by the end of the century. Performed by women troupes, early Kabuki was often quite risqué, with actresses sometimes providing additional services as prostitutes. As a result the government first banned women from Kabuki, and when troupes of adolescent boys proved equally problematic, it enacted further regulations limiting Kabuki to adult men. This resulted in *onnagata*, female roles performed by men, one of Kabuki's most distinctive features.

During its heyday in the 18th and 19th centuries, Kabuki developed a remarkable corpus of plays to feed the voracious demand of its audiences for increasingly spectacular vehicles through which their favorite actors could shine onstage. Forbidden from depicting current events or recent history, playwrights instead turned to the wars at the collapse of the Heian period (794-1185), most notably to the tragic story of Minamoto no Yoshitsune, the handsome young general who led the Minamoto clan to victory, only to be persecuted and eventually assassinated by his jealous older brother. Other popular figures included the Soga brothers, one of whom took on the identity of the commoner Sukeroku to avenge their father's killing, resulting in the most familiar of all Kabuki subjects. Kabuki writers also turned to the supernatural, with some plays featuring foxes that could take human shape and other unusual subject matter.

Ukiyo-e artists not only painted signboards and other advertisements for the newest Kabuki plays, but also mass-produced woodblock images of celebrated actors in their most recent roles that were avidly collected by their fans. Several families of artists, including the Torii, Katsukawa, and Utagawa, specialized in Kabuki actor portraits, resulting in some of the best-known images of ukiyo-e.

This exhibition explores the depiction of Kabuki subjects and actors in Japanese woodblock prints from the 17th through the 19th centuries, with works by some of the most famous ukiyo-e artists, including the Utagawa School print designers Toyokuni, Kunisada, Kuniyoshi, and Hiroshige. This is the second in a two-part series organized jointly by the Academy's Asian Art Department, the Center for Japanese Studies at the University of Hawaii, and a graduate course in Japanese Literature of the Edo period supervised by Professor Joel Cohn. It was curated by graduate students Erica Abbott, RaeAnn Dietlin, Daniel Sargent, Christopher Smith, and Patrick Woo.