

Nature, Dreams & Fantasy: Modern Japanese Creative Prints of the Post-War Period

Early in the summer of 1959, James A. Michener visited Tokyo on business. He had just heard that his latest novel, *Hawaii*, was headed for the top of the New York Times best-seller list. Michener had already begun to collect modern Japanese prints—*Sōsaku Hanga* (“Creative Prints”)—but during this pivotal summer he entered a gallery in Tokyo’s Ginza district and was dazzled by the works. Feeling financially flush, Michener, who as a writer understood the challenges unknown artists face, was also sympathetic to struggling woodblock print artists. At that moment he decided to collect modern prints in earnest, acting almost as a patron.

The ideology behind *Sōsaku Hanga* is “self-carving and self-printing,” as opposed to ukiyo-e prints (the traditional Japanese woodblock prints of the 17th to mid-19th centuries), which were collaborations between publishers, designers, carvers and printers.

Onchi Kōshirō (1891-1955) was the leader of the modern print movement, as well as a prominent abstract artist. In fact, the concept of “self-carving and self-printing” was derived from the modern Western idea of individual expression. Many modern Japanese artists strove for a new way to express their personal artistic vision through woodblock prints. By the 1930s, abstract art had become a major style in Japan. Although at first glance the expressionist art of the West seemed new to Japan, both self-expression and attempts to capture the essence of an object had been part of the

Japanese art tradition since the Muromachi period, visible in ink paintings by such artists as Tōyō Sesshū (1420-1506).

On view are approximately 20 prints created during the post-war period. Japanese who bore psychological scars from the effects of the war were drawn to their fantastic, dream-like atmosphere. The prints also appealed to the many American military officers who lived in Japan during the Occupation, as well as to later tourists who acquired these dynamic prints that epitomized a new Japan.