

Picturesque Prints: Traditional Japanese Woodblock Art in the 20th Century

Picturesque Prints presents a selection of modern Japanese *shin hanga* landscape prints donated to the Academy by local collector Philip H. Roach Jr. Over the past twenty years, Mr. Roach has donated more than 1200 modern Japanese prints to the Academy. A retired architect from New Orleans, he says that modern prints inspired his designs from the moment he first began collecting them in 1950.

The *shin hanga* (new prints) movement was begun by publisher Watanabe Shōzaburō (1885-1962) during the early 20th century, and further developed by artists and intellectuals who endeavored to revitalize the traditional Japanese art form of ukiyo-e prints. At a time when there was intense interest in European and American art in Japan and earlier ukiyo-e was avidly collected abroad, *shin hanga* helped to establish a modern national artistic identity for Japanese woodblock prints within the international art world.

Watanabe, a dealer who exported ukiyo-e prints to Europe and the United States, felt that although conventional ukiyo-e had its strengths, the Japanese woodblock prints of his time lacked both novelty and creativity. He was inspired by Western art, particularly watercolor paintings, which were imbued with light and movement. He began to envision contemporary Japanese woodblock prints that incorporated a similar aesthetic.

Watanabe's achievements in this area motivated other publishers and artists to elaborate upon the new style of Japanese woodblock prints he had established. The subject matter of most *shin hanga* was the same as traditional ukiyo-e and included the "birds and flowers" and landscapes seen in this exhibition. However, *shin hanga* artists such as Kawase Hasui (1883-1957) borrowed the Western technique of chiaroscuro (the depiction of light and shadow) as well as Impressionistic methods of portraying vibrations upon the water's surface and hazy atmospheres with soft, pleasant colors. The resulting *shin hanga* soon gained popularity among both domestic and foreign audiences.

Although *shin hanga* remained unrecognized by most ukiyo-e scholars for much of the 20th century, in the past thirty years it has come to be seen as an important movement that contributed significantly to the modernization of traditional Japanese art. In this sense, *shin hanga* parallels efforts in the early 20th century to establish a national style of Japanese painting, called *nihonga* (literally "Japanese painting"), in response to an increasing awareness of national painting movements in European countries. In fact, many of the artists represented in the exhibition were trained as *nihonga* painters. Mr. Roach's donations to the Academy have played a key role in augmenting the museum's collection of Edo-period ukiyo-e given to the museum by Mr. and Mrs. James A. Michener.