

## Poets and Printmakers: Literary Themes in Japanese Prints

Ukiyo-e, “pictures of the floating world,” are best known for their magnificent depictions of stately courtesans and Kabuki actors, and later for the lyrical landscapes of masters such as Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849) and Utagawa Hiroshige (1797-1858). At the same time, there is an intimate connection between woodblock prints and literature in Japan that can be traced back to the very inception of the print as a medium for artistic expression.

The earliest Japanese prints were illustrations that accompanied Buddhist scriptures. By the Edo period (1615-1868) there was a vast range of printed material on everything from popular fiction and practical handbooks to rarefied classical literature, treatises on philosophy and government, and historical writings. The relationship between prints and poetry was especially close, and many print designers, including Hokusai, not only depended in part on luxurious *surimono* prints privately commissioned by poetry clubs for their livelihood and professional reputation, but were themselves members of such clubs, and in some cases capable writers. Not surprisingly, ukiyo-e prints often drew from both Chinese and Japanese poetry and classical literature for their subjects. Even the most remote antiquity was depicted, as in Hiroshige’s rare print *The Gods Izanagi and Izanami on the Floating Bridge of Heaven*, where Japan’s ancient progenitors are shown descending from the heavens to inhabit the world they have created.

The Academy continues its woodblock print collaboration with the University of Hawai'i–Mānoa with this exhibition. Working in conjunction with the Academy's Department of Asian Art and UH's Center for Japanese Studies, graduate students from the Department of East Asian Languages and Literatures at the University of Hawaii under the direction of Professor Joel Cohn studied Japanese woodblock prints with themes derived from literary sources in the Academy's renowned collection, and prepared a special exhibition based upon the results of their research. This exhibition was curated by Malgorzata Citko, Christopher Hicks, Kyoungwon Oh, Matthew Shores, and Caroline Yamamoto.