

Press release

The Beauty of the Moment – Women in Japanese Woodblock Prints

7 July – 14 October 2012

The exhibition ‘The Beauty of the Moment’ is composed of three units of artistic work, each from a different century and created in a different medium: woodblock prints of the 18th/19th centuries, photography of the 19th/20th centuries, and film of the 21st century. The common theme of all of them is to capture a fleeting moment in Japanese society of their time. The main focus is on *bijinga* prints, ‘pictures of beautiful women’ whose beauty is honoured in snapshots of irretrievable magic.

Woodblock prints

The main part of the exhibition is composed of 100 woodblock prints depicting beautiful women from the Honolulu Museum of Art. As one of the largest museums of Hawaii, it possesses among others more than 10,000 single sheets of outstanding Japanese woodblock prints. From this collection, a theme has been taken which particularly fascinated the famous American writer and collector, James A. Michener (1907–1997), the previous owner of the majority of these prints: ‘pictures of beautiful women’. This selection includes numerous masterpieces from all the woodblock print artists who have made a name for them-selves in this genre.

Photographs

The theme of ‘beautiful women’ also has a very important place in the photos which were taken towards the end of the 19th century in Japan by well-known photographers including Kusakabe Kimbei, the Venetians Felice Beato and Adolfo Farsari or the Austrian Raimund von Stillfried-Ratenicz who lived in Japan. Many of the scenes represented in these exquisitely artistic photographs, especially those taken in the studio, seem to be taken from the world of woodblock printing.

The Museo delle Culture in Lugano recently acquired a collection of more than 5,000 hand-coloured albumen photographs of which 50 examples were chosen for the exhibition. Here, in a sense, the same process happens again as in the development of woodblock printing. Both in photography and in prints, the first artworks were black and white.

In a second phase they were coloured by hand before it became technically simple to produce multicoloured works.

Video

The exhibition is completed by the inclusion of two video installations by the artist Tabaimo (born 1975), loaned by the Gallery Koyanagi in Tokyo. With her striking installation in the Japanese Pavilion at the 2011 Venice Biennale, Tabaimo consolidated her reputation as one of the most important contemporary Japanese artists.

Tabaimo's multi-layered allusions to traditional woodblock prints in their thrillingly independent, often disturbing art, open a window on to contemporary Japanese society. In the animation films chosen for the exhibition, 'public conVENience' and 'Japanese Bathhouse – Gents', she focuses her skills as a graphic artist on subliminal social conventions, whose peculiarities she mercilessly exposes.

<http://www.art21.org/videos/preview-tabaimo-in-season-6-of-art-in-the-twenty-first-century>

'Pictures of beautiful women' in woodblock prints

The focus of the exhibition is on the 'pictures of beautiful women', Japanese *bijinga*, in Japanese wood-block prints. Literally, this genre means beautiful people of both sexes but depictions of women are much more common. The idealised beauties are elegant and desirable women who may appear as courtesans (including prostitutes of various ranks), geishas (literally, 'entertainers' or 'performing artists') skilled in music, dance and conversation, waitresses in tea-houses, saleswomen or simply townswomen in general. One seeks in vain for individual traits of real women in these depictions. So the beauty contest is between the artists and the models they have created rather than between the represented beauties themselves. Thus innocent faces of young girls by Suzuki HARUNOBU (1725?–1770) compete with the mature beauties of the uncontested master of this genre: Kitagawa UTAMARO (1753–1806). No fewer than twenty of the hundred works shown in this exhibition are based on his designs.

Japanese woodblock prints depict an evanescent world of fleeting beauty, which reflects the dynamic cultural life in the big cities of Japan, especially its capital, Edo (today's Tokyo), at the turn of the 19th century. In Japanese, the term *ukiyo-e*, 'pictures of the floating world' is used as a synonym for woodblock prints.

The 'floating world' in these depictions can also be interpreted as the world of fashion which itself is constantly changing and ephemeral. Indeed, the highly simplified outlines of the women's bodies seem to serve the artists primarily for defining surfaces which are covered with an incredible wealth of changing fabric patterns and colour combinations. Clothes, hairstyles, and hair combs are the real eye-catchers. And therefore in the 'pictures of beautiful women' the changing ideal of beauty figures more prominently in relation to fashion than to physiognomic preferences. Women whose clothes and hairstyles followed the latest fashions were among the trendsetters of their time.

During the Tokugawa shogunate (1603–1868) the arts flourished and the acquisition of inexpensive woodblock prints became a popular pastime. Publishers commissioned artists to create the designs and looked after the production and sale of the prints. As works on paper, they were not intended to last and most buyers only kept them for a limited time. Every month buyers could choose from hundreds of new pictures, and previously acquired works could be replaced by new ones with the latest designs. To remind them of happy events or enjoyable entertainment, people would buy the portraits of leading actors or beautiful courtesans. Of course, prints varied in quality right from the start, both in originality of design and printing techniques. Prints enhanced with powdered mica, for example, like the one on our poster, were highly desirable and very costly even at the time.

Woodblock prints were intended, above all, to be pleasing to the eye. Like commercial graphic art today, they were also used in advertising. Up until the end of the 19th century, woodblock prints reached the West as packing material for trade goods, and because of their unusual compositions and technical intricacy they found enthusiastic collectors. These prints, of which only a few copies survive today, remain the most popular Japanese art forms and continue to serve as a source of inspiration for artists and designers. One unusual type of Japanese woodblock print is what is known as the 'pillar print', Japanese *hashira-e*. This narrow, vertical format enables artists to catch their subjects in intimate moments, as if peering at them through the crack in a slightly open sliding door. There is no doubt that this format not only allowed artists to create striking compositions but also appealed to the voyeurism of their clients.

Loans

In collaboration with the Honolulu Museum of Art / Conservation funded by the Robert F. Lange Foundation

Exhibition sponsors

With the support of JTI (main sponsor) and R. Brunner

Catalogue

The Beauty of the Moment

Women in Japanese woodblock prints

Edited by Katharina Epprecht, Museum Rietberg Zürich

Verlag Scheidegger & Spiess

Text in German and English

Paperback, approx. 182 pages, approx. 125 colour illustrations

23 x 30 cm, ISBN 978-3-85881-357-2, CHF 38 | EUR 34

Activities accompanying the exhibition

During the exhibition visitors can fold **origami** objects and learn the art of wrapping **tsutsumikata**.

Members of *Ikebana International, Chapter Zürich* present different flower arrangements every week which use different Ikebana styles including the Ikenobo, Sogetsu, Ohara, and Adachi schools.

Detailed information (German only) on the full accompanying programme with workshops, guided tours, talks and concerts can be found on our website www.rietberg.ch

Information and contact

Further information and download of photographs on www.rietberg.ch

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Hours: Tue–Sun 10.00–17.00 | Wed and Thu 10.00–20.00

Admission: Adults CHF 16 | reduced CHF 12 | up to the age of 16 free

Access: Tram 7 (direction Wollishofen) to the “Museum Rietberg” stop (4 stops from “Paradeplatz”). No parking; disabled parking available.

RailAway offer: By train to Museum Rietberg – www.railaway.ch 10% reduction for train tickets, transfer and admission.