

Presentation 2

Against the Grain: Untraditional Explorations, Interpretations and Extrapolations of Japanese Woodblock Prints

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Profile

Stephen Salel is the Robert F. Lange Foundation Curator of Japanese Art at the Honolulu Museum of Art. Mr. Salel received his MA in Art History from the University of Washington, Seattle, where he specialized in early modern Japanese painting. His curatorial portfolio includes a series of exhibitions on Japanese erotic art (*shunga*), which he co-curated with Curator of Asian Art Shawn Eichman, as well as a series of exhibitions on Japanese graphic novels (manga). Mr. Salel's publications include the book *Shunga: Stages of Desire* (Skira Rizzoli Publications, October 2014), which he co-authored with Dr. Eichman.

This presentation focuses on current strategies for presenting Japanese art at the Honolulu Museum of Art and the reasons why those strategies may differ from those at other institutions, including those within Japan. In particular, I'd like to discuss how the Honolulu Museum of Art's audience and the growth of its collection have necessitated the development of exhibitions that explore, interpret, and extrapolate from its print collection in novel ways.

The Honolulu Museum of Art was founded by Ms. Anna Rice Cooke, the daughter of a missionary family in the late 19th century. It was originally Ms. Cooke's home, and in 1927, after amassing a large collection of art from all over the world, she decided to convert it into a museum, which she called the Honolulu Academy of Arts.

The layout of the museum has evolved over the past 93 years, but for the past few decades, the art has been arranged according to cultures and divided geographically. The Asian wing of the museum includes a Korean art gallery, the Maurice J. Sullivan Family Gallery of Chinese Art, the Robert F. Lange Foundation Gallery for Japanese Prints, the Atsuhiko & Ina Goodwin Tateuchi Foundation Gallery of Japanese Art, and a venue for Pan-Asian Buddhist creations, all of which surround a Chinese courtyard.

The museum serves two distinct audiences: the ethnically diverse local community of Honolulu and its tourist population. It was to this first audience that Anna Rice Cooke dedicated the museum in 1927. In her mission statement, she expressed her hope of alleviating the sense of cultural isolation that local residents felt due to the geographic isolation of Hawaii: the museum was designed so that "*our children of many nationalities and races... may receive an intimation of their own cultural legacy and wake to the ideals embodied in the arts of their neighbors ...*"

Although the population to which she referred to at that time was almost entirely Hawaiian, the ethnic makeup of Honolulu has since changed dramatically. More than half of the residents are Asian-American, about one-sixth are Caucasian, an equal number are multiracial, and the Hawaiian population is now a mere 8 percent. When you look at the nationality of tourists who visit Honolulu, there's a very different breakdown. Over half are from the United States, 13% are from



The Atsuhiko & Ina Goodwin Tateuchi Foundation Gallery of Japanese Art, Honolulu Museum of Art

Japan, and 6% are from Canada. These two surveys reveal that the visitors to our institution include people with a wide variety of cultural references when viewing works of Japanese art.

The collecting strategies of the museum's founder and its donors, particularly their interest in Japanese woodblock prints, have been of inestimable influence. The three most active collectors have been Ms. Cooke, the author James Michener, and Richard Lane, who was both a Japanese literature scholar and a private art dealer. Ms. Cooke challenged the prevalent definition of Japanese printmaking by collecting modern *shin-hanga* prints by western artists who she personally knew: Charles Bartlett, Elizabeth Keith, Bertha Lum, and Paul Jacoulet. Michener's collection of approximately 6,000 works was a combination of classical works of ukiyo-e and modern Japanese prints. Among those woodcuts is largest collection of Hiroshige prints in the world. As a literature scholar, Lane amassed a very large collection of woodblock-printed books. Thanks to him, we have a large number of remarkably early books by Nishikawa Sukenobu and Hishikawa Moronobu, among others.

The Honolulu Museum of Art's large collection of Japanese prints obliges its curators to explore that collection thoroughly and to display works that viewers are not particularly familiar with. Some of these artists have been overlooked because of their ethnicity or their national identity. Because of Honolulu's demographics, this is a topic of particular social relevance. From August through October of 2016, we presented the non-objective abstract prints of Uchima Ansei, a Japanese-American artist born and raised in Los Angeles who, through the encouragement of Michener and other American collectors, moved to Japan and integrated into the Japanese print community in Tokyo.

Though our audience may not share a common cultural background, their familiarity with contemporary political discourse has encouraged us to interpret early modern prints through the lens of contemporary discussions. In an exhibition called *Hiroshige's City: From Edo to Tokyo*, presented from February through August 2016, we discussed how Hiroshige's series *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo* could be sequenced in a way that showed the urbanization of Japan's capitol. The exhibition concluded with works by two contemporary Japanese artists, the lithographer Motoda Hisaharu and the video artist Yoshimura Ayako, both of whom discussed the aftermath of over-urbanization.

Another contemporary topic that works of ukiyo-e address is sexology and the evolving attitudes about sexuality within a particular culture. Inspired by the numerous works of shunga – Japanese erotic art – that Richard Lane had collected, and in collaboration with Shawn Eichman, the Curator of Asian art, I organized a series of exhibitions on this topic. The first, *The Arts of the Bedchamber: Japanese Shunga*, was held from November 2012 through March 2013. This explored erotic works from the late 17th and 18th centuries. The second exhibition, shown from November 2013 through March 2014, was called *Tongue in Cheek: Erotic Art in 19th-Century Japan*. And the series concluded with *Modern Love: 20th-Century Japanese Erotic Art*, on display from November 2014 through March 2015. Several works we included in this final show were manga – contemporary graphic novels.

The topic of manga leads to my final strategy. After the Meiji Restoration, the technical tradition of ukiyo-e continues through the *shin-hanga* and *sōsaku hanga* movements. The



Uchima Ansei (1921–2000)
Song of the Seashore
United States, 1957
Woodblock print; ink and color on paper
Gift of James A. Michener, 1983 (18865)



Installation view, *Hiroshige's City: From Edo to Tokyo*,
Honolulu Museum of Art,
February 2016 – August, 2016



Installation view, *Arts of the Bedchamber: Japanese Shunga*,
Honolulu Museum of Art,
November 23, 2012 – March 17, 2013

populist tradition of ukiyo-e, however, is more clearly seen in modern manga, and so I have been presenting exhibitions of manga as an extrapolation of our ukiyo-e print collection.

The first manga exhibition at the Honolulu Museum of Art, from August 2016 through January 2017, was *Visions of Gothic Angels: Japanese Manga by Takaya Miou*. The next show was *The Disasters of Peace: Social Discontent in the Manga of Tsuge Tadao and Katsumata Susumu*, held from November 2017 through April 2018. These were works by two artists who worked in the genre of alternative manga and who published in the magazine *Garo*. The final manga exhibition, which I am currently preparing, is scheduled for March through July of 2021. It is entitled *EmPOWERed! How Women Revolutionized Japanese Manga*. It deals with *shōjo* manga (comic art for adolescent women), *josei* manga (graphic novels for adult women), and the way those genres reflect developments in the women's rights movement both within Japan and internationally.

These curatorial strategies at the Honolulu Museum of Art admittedly differ from the approach to Japanese art history seen in museums within Japan. Nevertheless, they are intended to represent Japan's history and culture accurately and respectfully while reflecting the cultural diversity of Honolulu's community and the insights of the museum's most significant patrons.