Meiji Modern
FIFTY YEARS OF NEW JAPAN

Large Print Exhibition Texts
Urban transformation, boundless enthusiasm for new technologies, and rising geopolitical tensions: these circumstances defined Japan’s Meiji era (1868–1912) as much as they describe our own. While the changes wrought upheaval and uncertainty, many people, including artists, saw the Meiji period as a time teeming with possibility.

Against this backdrop, art emerged as one of Japan’s most profitable industries and a singular means of representing the modern nation-state. Artists manipulated traditional mediums and materials to achieve dazzling effects unseen—and unimaginable—in previous epochs.

In Japan and abroad, Meiji art filled international expositions, domestic halls of industry, and private residences. While until recently Meiji art has been neglected or considered derivative, the global vogue for Japanese art during the late nineteenth century reminds us that modern art does not look the same in all places. Meiji art evolved in its own way and according to its own prerogatives in direct conversation with Euro-American trends, including Art Deco.

Meiji Modern presents a new and holistic vision of people and places in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Japan, including works collected during the period that reflected taste and aesthetic discourses in the country, as well as export objects made to appeal to an international audience. When Americans first began collecting Meiji art, it was considered contemporary art. Many artists were still active and entered into dialogue with collectors, traveling to the United States to share their work, or
welcoming foreign visitors to their studios in Japan. Additionally, just as aspects of modernity can be violent and ambivalent, the arts of Meiji Japan are both brilliant and dark. Japan’s victory in the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895) initiated a doctrine of imperial expansion, and objects that buttressed the aggressive ideology of empire can be seen throughout the exhibition. Thus, far from limited to surface expression, the arts of Meiji are replete with the complexities and struggles of the age.

Taken together with the final decade of the Tokugawa shoguns’ regime, this period constitutes “fifty years of new Japan”—a phrase coined by Meiji leaders themselves. Meiji Modern spans the so-called opening of Japan in the 1860s to the global fin-de-siècle culture of 1900–1915, at the dawn of the Taishō period. This pivotal era is presented thematically, highlighting both the creative adaptation of traditional forms to a modern age and the fascination of artists and the public with their ever-expanding world.

[Credit Lines]

Meiji Modern is organized by the Japanese Art Society of America in celebration of its 50th Anniversary. It is curated by Chelsea Foxwell, Associate Professor of Art History at the University of Chicago, and Bradley Bailey, Ting Tsung and Wei Fong Chao Curator of Asian Art, The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. This exhibition is made possible by Lorna Ferguson and Terry Clark. Major support for this exhibition at the Smart Museum has been provided by the Center for East Asian Studies at the University of Chicago, including funding from a Title VI National
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Crafting a Modern State

When the fourteen-year-old Emperor Meiji was “restored” as the leader of Japan in 1868, the country lacked most of the features of a modern nation-state, such as an organized military, a national anthem, or a national flag. How was this boy, raised in courtly seclusion, to become not only a leader but the embodiment of the modern nation of Japan?

Oligarchs and foreign advisors shaped important aspects of modern governance, including the 1889 constitution. Even in the early years of Meiji, government officials moved quickly to establish imperial symbols such as the kikumon (chrysanthemum crest) and the flag of the Rising Sun. The literal image of the emperor was also of great importance. In 1873 he famously severed his topknot and grew his now-iconic mustache, donning a Western-style military uniform, and in 1889 an idealized goshin-ei (exalted or honorable image) was disseminated widely. The public image of the imperial family became equally important. With the lifting of strict prohibitions on depictions of the imperial family, the necessity of and desire for their likenesses spurred artistic production. Similarly, the many public celebrations and official commemorations required art and decorative arts, including official uniforms and diplomatic gifts.
As important as art and craft were for establishing the image of the emperor and the nation, they were equally important to its functioning and funding, attracting foreign interest and investment as part of the official policy of encouraging new industries and manufactures.
Gōtō Shōzaburō
Active 1860–1910

Vase with Blossoming Flowers
1890s

Cloissoné (enamels over metal)
Yale University Art Gallery, Gift of Mrs. Nathan Baldwin, 1899.4a

Though Nagoya was the commercial center of cloisonné production, Gotō Shōzaburō (also known as Seizaburō) was located in Yokohama. With access to an extensive foreign clientele, he is well represented in European and American collections, and he exhibited his wares internationally. This imposing vase, standing nearly six feet tall, was the first example of Asian art to enter the collection of the Yale University Art Gallery, which acquired it in 1899. According to a newspaper clipping, this vase was “the largest piece of its kind ever turned out, and . . . the maker does not care to undertake another of similar size without being paid a considerably higher price than $1,000,” on account of the high risk of failure when firing such an intricate piece.

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Kaishū
Active Meiji period

Temptation
circa 1907

Hanging scroll; ink and color on paper
Collection of Tusha Buntin, Honolulu, HI

Long held in a Hawaiian collection, the origins of this painting are still mysterious, though its message is clear: a blindfolded Japanese woman is being led—or tempted—off a ledge by a shabbily-dressed foreigner, who points to the right, presumably to the West. Behind him are ghostly apparitions reminiscent of gaki, or “hungry ghosts,” associated with Buddhist conceptions of hell.

Above her flies a beautiful Japanese deity, gesturing in the opposite direction and urging the woman to return to the safety of the East. The deity’s flowing hair and posture resemble those of an apsara, a celestial musician who inhabits heaven in Hindu and Buddhist theology. Around her neck is a five-pointed star, which, with its nautical associations, is a possible reference to the protection offered by the Imperial Navy. This painting embodies the
reservations held by many Japanese about the adoption of Western customs during the Meiji period.

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Kobayashi Kiyochika
1847–1915

Kiyochika, a native of Edo, did not study with the major ukiyo-e masters, but developed a distinctive style that incorporated elements from American and European prints and illustrations. Known for his expression of light and shadow, the artist’s most famous themes were gas lamps, electric illumination, sunsets, and fires, all of which can be seen here.

Whether in urban night scenes or depictions of the sunset glow over less populated locales, Kiyochika’s prints achieve a new form of introspective lyricism that avoids overwrought sentimentality. While incorporating effects from European watercolors and the hand-colored lithographs of Currier & Ives, these landscapes and cityscapes also recall the Japanese woodblock print tradition of showing famous sites in different weather conditions and times of day.
Kobayashi Kiyochika
1847–1915

Taro Inari Shrine at the Asakusa Ricefields
1877

Polychrome woodblock print (nishiki-e)
Collection of Dr. Vincent Covello

A lonely torii gate stands at the end of the road, isolated from ramshackle buildings, as the moon ascends in the purple twilight over the city’s edge. In the early 1800s, the Taro Inari Shrine, dedicated to the esteemed Shinto deity of fertility, rice and sake, was widely venerated in Asakusa, in the northern part of Tokyo. However, by the late nineteenth century, the shrine had fallen into neglect following the quick rise and fall of a hayarigami, or a god that temporarily attracts a large and fervent crowd. The Asakusa ricefields frame this scene at the city’s margins, devoid of any human figures. Kiyochika captures this moment, possibly fore-seeing impending desolation after the heady embrace of modernity in Japan.

This print is one of the first compositions of the series in which Kiyochika documents the rapid modernization of Tokyo. This scene, unlike the nine other prints, does not
emphasize a modern, artificial light source, but rather captures the full moon illuminating the countryside near the entrance to the shrine. Kiyochika seems to be holding on to something that was lost in modern Japan.

—Hella Zhou, MAPH ’25, Art History

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Kobayashi Kiyochika
1847–1915

Great Fire of the Night of 2/11/1881, as Seen from Hisamatsu-chō
1891

Polychrome woodblock print (nishiki-e)
Collection of E. Anthony Petrelli, F2014.3

The Great Fire at Ryōgoku Drawn from Hamachō
1881
Publisher: Fukuda Kumajirō (active circa 1874–1898)

Polychrome woodblock print (nishiki-e)
Braun Collection

The fire depicted here was the largest of the Meiji era, laying waste to more than 20,000 square meters and affecting more than 30,000 people. It is said that while Kiyochika was sketching the fire, his own house burned down. In the 1880s, nishiki-e designers were often criticized by government officials, who found their subject matter and styles too old-fashioned to represent Japan on
the world stage. Despite this, however, Kiyochika’s woodblock prints of fires employed new and innovative carving and printing techniques, incorporating concepts foreign effects like chiaroscuro, to produce sketch-like results.
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Kobayashi Kiyochika
1847–1915

Publisher: Fukuda Kumajirō (active circa 1874–1898)

Koromo River below Tennō-ji Temple
1880
Polychrome woodblock print (nishiki-e)
Minneapolis Institute of Art, Gift from the Collection of Edith and the Late John Payne, 2019.139.71

Senbongui and Ryōgoku Bridge
1880
Polychrome woodblock print (nishiki-e)
Minneapolis Institute of Art, Gift from the Collection of Edith and the Late John Payne, 2019.139.74
Kobayashi Kiyochika
1847–1915

Publisher: Fukuda Kumajirō (active circa 1874–1898)

A Night at Sumida River
1880

Polychrome woodblock print (nishiki-e)
Minneapolis Institute of Art, Gift from the Collection of Edith and the Late John Payne, 2019.139.85

Summer Night at Asakusa Kuramae
1881

Polychrome woodblock print (nishiki-e)
Minneapolis Institute of Art, Gift from the Collection of Edith and the Late John Payne, 2019.139.80

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Kobayashi Kiyochika
1847–1915

Fireworks at Ikenohata
1881
Publisher: Fukuda Kumajirō (active circa 1874–1898)

Polychrome woodblock print (nishiki-e)
Minneapolis Institute of Art, Gift from the Collection of Edith and the Late John Payne, 2019.139.76

Kiyochika’s woodblock print skillfully plays with contrasts of light and darkness, drawing on Western-style watercolors. Credit for these effects should also be given to the carvers and printers of the multiple wood blocks under the direction of enterprising publisher Fukuda Kumajirō, who suppressed outlines to achieve effects of shadow and illumination unprecedented in earlier woodblock prints.

On the stunning night depicted in this woodblock print, a vast assembly of figures, shown as mere silhouettes, lines Shinobazu Pond with eager anticipation, gazing at the mesmerizing fireworks above. Five red lanterns appear
artfully staggered between bare tree branches, casting a warm glow that illuminates the darkness. Two children, one behind the other, climb a tree in search of an up-close view of the exploding fireworks. In the backdrop, delicate lights twinkle across the houses on the opposite riverbank, their reflections gently dancing on the water’s surface. At the zenith of the composition, fireworks erupt in a burst of resplendent colors, presenting a fleeting yet profound moment of beauty.

—Lingyu Sun, MAPH ’24, Cinema and Media Studies
Kobayashi Kiyochika
1847–1915

Rainy Night at Yanagiwara
1881

Polychrome woodblock print (nishiki-e)
Minneapolis Institute of Art, Gift from the Collection of Edith and the Late John Payne, 2019.139.78
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Unidentified artist after Suzuki Shin’ichi and Maruki Riyō
1835–1918; 1854–1923

The Empress of Japan
1889

Unidentified artist after Edoardo Chiossone and Maruki Riyō
1833–1898; 1854–1923

The Meiji Emperor
1888

Hand-colored glass slides

These sorts of glass slides, reproductions of the official photographic portraiture that originated during the mid-Meiji period, were likely commercially produced in the United States, though their manufacturer has not been identified. Known as goshin-ei, these official portraits of the emperor and empress were taken in the late 1880s. The image of the emperor is a composite image made by
the Italian engraver and painter Edoardo Chiossone (1833–1898), who was brought by the Meiji government to Japan to teach Western-style painting and drawing. Unwilling to sit for an official portrait, the emperor’s visage was instead surreptitiously sketched by Chiossone as the monarch dined at a restaurant. Later, his face was added to a photograph of Chiossone himself modeling the official court uniform seen here, resulting in this widely distributed portrait.
Gōda Kiyoshi
1862–1938

Portrait of His Imperial Highness the Crown Prince
1889
Publisher: Nippōsha

Lithograph
Saint Louis Art Museum, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Charles A. Lowenhaupt, 211:2011

Gōda, who trained with Parisian printmakers as a teen, uses subtle gradations of ink to delineate the subtly furrowed brow, glossy military hat, and full cheeks of young Crown Prince Yoshihito (the Future Emperor Taishō) in this widely circulated lithograph. Compared to other forms of printmaking—woodcut, engraving, and etching—lithography was faster, cheaper, and easier to produce, making it an ideal medium to advertise Japan’s modernization projects.

Such is the case of this portrait in Japan’s oldest daily newspaper, Tokyo Daily News: according to the inscription at the lower margin of the page, it was a special insert in issue 5407 on November 3, 1889, to commemorate the emperor’s birthday and investiture as crown prince. This
lithograph also gestures to Yoshihito’s power as enshrined in Japan’s constitutional monarchy, promulgated earlier that year in the form of the Meiji Constitution.

—Stephanie S.E. Lee, PhD Candidate in Art History, Northwestern University

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Yukawa Shōdō
1868–1955

Portrait of An Offering, from the series One Hundred Beauties Performing Ancient and Modern Customs, no. 92
1877

Polychrome woodblock print (nishiki-e)
Private Collection, New York City

In this print from Yukawa’s most famous series, Kinkō fūzoku hyaku bijin (One Hundred Beauties Performing Ancient and Modern Customs, 1901–1903), a young woman kneels before a framed image of the Meiji empress, with a partially visible second frame implying the presence of an image of the emperor. Such veneration of the imperial household became common in the Meiji period following the Imperial Rescript of Education of 1890, which required portraits of the emperor to be placed in schools, where students were made to bow to them. In the 1880s and prior, however, commercial sales of imperial portraits were more restricted. With the emperor’s official portrait omitted, Yukawa could focus on images of female beauty while making a clever reference to the recently expired prohibition on images of the emperor,
thus embodying at once ancient tradition and modern custom.

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Attributed to Hattori Tadasaburō
Active circa 1890s

Lamp Globe with Design of Spiny Chrysanthemums
circa 1910

Plique-à-jour enamels
Private Collection, New York City

This globe, like the red example nearby, employs the technique shotai shippō, or plique-à-jour enameling, to create a translucent sphere—perfect for a lamp. Whereas the red example has two holes, this globe is fully enclosed with only a single opening at its base, indicating that it was made for an electric lamp. Electric lighting quickly replaced gas lamps in the later Meiji period, brightly illuminating public spaces and intimate interiors with the glow of modern technology. Despite its novel and cutting-edge use at the time, this globe was decorated with classical Japanese motifs, including spiny chrysanthemums, an emblem of the Imperial Household.

The Meiji government encouraged artists to rework and reuse themes from Japanese art and antiquity to imbue even new technological wonders with a spirit of the classical past.
Hattori Tadasaburō
d. 1939

Lamp Globe with Phoenix
circa 1910

Plique-à-jour enamels
Private Collection, New York City

The technique of shotai shippō, or plique-à-jour, is an example of the modern innovations of cloisonné makers during the Meiji period, here used to enliven historical and natural motifs on works of art that reflect the new technologies of Meiji Japan, including new forms of lighting. Like traditional cloisonné, shotai requires a copper base, covered bent wires, and colored enamels; for plique-à-jour, however, this copper base is etched away, essentially dissolved with an acidic solution, resulting in a translucent, seemingly bodiless vessel, ideally suited for a decorative lamp globe. Created for a gas lamp, the globe bears a design of phoenixes intertwined with decorative paulownia crests, the symbol of the Meiji government. Throughout the design the colors are mixed, as seen in the soft shading and gradients of the feathers of the sacred birds, implying the use of musen or “wireless” enameling, another Meiji period invention.
Collector’s Album of Prints
late 19th century

Polychrome woodblock prints (nishiki-e)
The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago, Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Herman Pines in honor of Dr. Julius Steiglitz, 1989.14a–nn

Left:

Utagawa Hiroshige III
1842–1894

The Hotel at Tsukiji, Tokyo
1870

Right:

Kobayashi Eisei

The Opening of the First Domestic Industrial Exhibition at Ueno Park, Tokyo (one panel of triptych)
1877
This double-sided album is one of a pair. This album demonstrates how collectors preserved and enjoyed prints by pasting them into books. The prints in this album range in date from 1859 to 1885 with the majority being made in the first decade of the Meiji era. Some prints in the album show kabuki plays, while others, like the ones on view here, document the changing urban landscape of Tokyo (formerly known as Edo). The Tsukiji Hoterukan was built in 1869 to accommodate foreign guests and became an immediate landmark until its loss from fire in 1872. The massive complex, its dimensions noted on the print, combined an American-looking cupola and weathervane with features of a traditional tile-roofed earthen storehouse. A large carriage drawn by four horses proceeds from the main gate amidst Western, Japanese, and Chinese bystanders.

The adjacent print dominated by red depicts the First Domestic Industrial Exhibition in Ueno Park, a vast event featuring Western-style buildings and machinery as cherry blossoms bloomed.

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Utagawa Hiroshige III
1842–1894

A Merchant Building in Yokohama
1867

Polychrome woodblock print (nishiki-e) triptych
Collection of David Libertson

Prints made in Yokohama offered a view, sometimes quite literally, into the lives of the foreigners who resided in the port, like those who can be seen here through an open door and the glass windows of the building. Adding to the novelty of this composition, Hiroshige III emphasizes the Western-style stone construction of the two-story building, though the tile roof is Japanese. Initially, Yokohama was segregated, with the Europeans and Americans restricted to the eastern portion of the city, which also had an area for Chinese residents, one of whom can be seen at far right, distinguished by his long braid and clothing. In the early 1860s demand for images of Yokohama was high, driven mostly by curiosity. By the late 1860s, however, Yokohama was viewed less as a strange novelty and more as a sign of Japanese modern achievements and cosmopolitanism.

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Below:

Unidentified artist

The American Legation, Yokohama

circa 1880

Hand-tinted albumen print
Syracuse University Art Museum, Gift of Dr. Henry ’51 and Mrs. Nancy Peikin Rosin, 1991.166

Yokohama’s growth from a small fishing village to a major city was brought about by its designation by the shogunate as one of the treaty ports where the five treaty nations were allowed to trade. The person who took this photograph is unknown, but both Japanese and Europeans documented Yokohama’s rapid development in pictures. Japanese photographers were especially fascinated by the city’s foreign-style architecture, including some of Japan’s first brick buildings. In this photograph, the American legation is surrounded by telegraph poles, demonstrating Yokohama’s swift technological development. The church in the lower right of the photograph would have also been a novel sight; the shogunate’s centuries-old ban on Christianity would have been lifted only about seven years earlier, in 1873.
—Simon Tsuchiya Lenoe, MAPH ’24, East Asian Languages and Civilizations

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Above:

Unidentified artist

Grand Hotel, Yokohama (Front View)
circa 1880

Hand-tinted albumen print

Like the print designers of the early 1860s, the photographers of Meiji Japan were captivated by the foreign-style architecture of Yokohama, and many established studios in the port city, allowing them to capture the sweeping changes to Japan’s urban landscape in real time. Overlooking Yokohama Harbor, The Grand Hotel was first opened in 1873 and by the late Meiji Period became one of Japan’s most fashionable hotels, complete with English-language menus, a wide selection of imported wines, and luxurious yōshoku (Japanese Western-style cuisine, a Meiji invention) dishes like Terrapin Stew à la Maryland and Filet of Beef à la Financière. Due to its fame and popularity with foreign visitors, the hotel became one of Yokohama’s most photographed sites, immortalized in countless postcards.
and scrapbooks, until its destruction in the Great Kantō Earthquake in 1923.

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Kintōzan
Active Meiji period

Satsuma Vase
Mid- to late Meiji period

Earthenware with enamel overglaze
Collection of Kazuo Kuwabara

One hundred and ten pieces of carefully individuated ceramics are depicted on the body of this vase. Tea wares, plates, sake cups, incense burners, and many more vessel types are fashioned here with distinct patterns and techniques. According to an inscription at the bottom of the vase, they are depictions of various porcelains made throughout Japan. The vessel was fired six times to achieve its finished state.

Initially produced around the seventeenth century by Korean potters who founded kilns near Kagoshima, Satsuma ware was also made in other regions of Japan during the Meiji period. They were displayed in various world expositions and acquired a certain prestige among wealthy art collectors in the West. The arrangement of so many varied types of porcelain thus reflect the wide-ranging artistic abilities of potters working in Japan while
also calling to mind the exciting and crowded displays of a domestic or world’s fair.

—Yoon-Jee Choi, PhD Candidate, Art History

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Utagawa Yoshitora

circa 1836–1882

Complete Enumeration of Scenic Places in Foreign Nations: City of Washington in America

1862

Polychrome woodblock print (nishiki-e) triptych
Collection of David Libertson

The opening of the port of Yokohama in 1859 contributed to unprecedented political unrest and economic instability but also intense curiosity about Europe and the United States. In response, Yoshitora designed numerous prints showing the thriving international port in Yokohama and imaginary scenes of life on foreign shores, including London, Paris, and Washington, D.C., seen here. In this depiction, he uses gray shading on the buildings to impart a sense of three-dimensionality, and women are shown in the full skirts and symmetrical curled hairstyles characteristic of the Civil War era. The inscription by Kanagaki Robun describes a “castle town” that sits “at the border of Virginia and Maryland,” where “the roads are wide and flat, and the residences line up neatly like the lines on a go board. . . . Nothing is lacking, but bookstores, bakeries, and tobacconists are particularly plentiful.”
Uchida Kuichi
1844–1875

His Imperial Majesty Mutsu Hito, Emperor of Japan
1873

Albumen silver print with applied color

In:

Thomas B. Van Buren
1824–1889

Labor and Porcelain in Japan
1882

Print publication
Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, The University of Chicago Library

Japan had no custom of disseminating the emperor’s image prior to the inception of diplomatic relations with the Western powers; on the contrary, during the Tokugawa period, portraying the rulers of Japan was considered
disrespectful, even illegal. In 1872 and 1873, the government hired Uchida Kuichi (1844–1875) to photograph the Emperor Meiji, first in Japanese dress and then in the military uniform seen here.

In this publication, the famous photograph has been hand-pasted to accompany text that originally served as a United States consular report on the conditions of Japan’s labor force circa 1880. In addition to covering land ownership, education, religion, customs, and gender norms, the report also summarizes the manufacture of porcelain and other forms of Japanese pottery, underscoring the topic’s prominence as a subject of concern to Anglophone readers.

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Utagawa Kunimasa IV (Kōchōrō)
1848–1920

Kabuki Performance of Chiarini’s Celebrated Circus
1896

Polychrome woodblock print (nishiki-e) triptych
The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art,
Museum purchase, 2020.14

Giuseppe Chiarini (1823–1897) and his Royal Italian Circus also gave a performance to the Meiji emperor and his court and toured extensively in Japan, visiting Yokohama, Nagasaki, Kobe, Kyoto, and Osaka. Their performances, which were held in a massive tent, inspired many prints and even a kabuki play, Narihibiku kiarini no kyokuba (Chiarini’s Celebrated Circus), written by the celebrated dramatist Kawatake Mokuami (1816–1893). Kunimasa IV’s vividly colored triptych reflects the accuracy of this kabuki play, with Japanese actors taking on the roles of Chiarini, shown at center with his trademark mustache, and even the one-legged performer, who can be seen in the right-most panel of Chikanobu’s composition.

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Toyohara Chikanobu
1838–1912

Chiarini: The World’s Greatest Circus
1886

Polychrome woodblock print (nishiki-e) triptych
The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art,
Museum purchase, 2020.16

The Royal Italian Circus performed in Akihabara in September of 1886. This triptych, advertising a public performance, shows that they brought with them exotic animals and exotic foreigners, such as a “French lady” and an “Englishman,” who would perform horse tricks, wrestle tigers, and as indicated at lower right, stick their heads inside the mouths of elephants. The shading and style here appear to reference earlier prints of public life in Yokohama, specifically those that show foreigners alongside imported animals. This stylistic choice was perhaps made to highlight the foreignness, and novelty, of the circus, qualities further emphasized by the background colors, which are modeled on the Italian flag.

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Shōsai Ikkei
Active 1870s

Complete View of a Steam Engine at Takanawa
1871–1872

Polychrome woodblock print (nishiki-e) triptych
Collection of David Libertson

In the autumn of 1872, Japan’s first railway opened, running between Yokohama and Shinbashi Station in Tokyo using imported British steam engines. The railway was quite profitable, and popular interest is reflected in the large number of woodblock prints released even before the line was completed. This bridge in Takanawa was a popular train-spotting location. Ikkei depicts the port at sunset with the silhouette of an ocean-going ship. Fashionable foreigners or Japanese in Western dress stand in the foreground, while the passengers include a range of people in Japanese dress. The crowds and a horse-drawn carriage passing along the bridge above are yet more signs of the bustling and ever-changing Tokyo.

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Toyohara Chikanobu  
1838–1912

Concert of European Music  
1889

Polychrome woodblock print (nishiki-e) triptych  
Collection of David Libertson

Illuminated beneath an elaborate globed chandelier, a group of musicians plays in front of a balcony, likely the Rokumeikan (Deer Cry Pavilion), a Western-style building designed by Josiah Conder (1852–1920) and opened in 1883. The Rokumeikan’s second story included several ballrooms and parlors, where members of the court and other government officials, preparing for foreign travel or to entertain visiting dignitaries, practiced Western etiquette, dancing, and music. Concerts like the one shown here became increasingly popular during the Meiji period. Although the title of this design refers to European music, the sheet music, reproduced faithfully in a cartouche at upper left, is actually a Japanese song written in European style, “Iwama no Shimizu” (Clear Water among Rocks), composed in 1888 by Owada Takeki (1857–1910) with lyrics by Oku Yoshiisa (1858–
1933). The song was also later published in the Ministry of Education’s official songbooks for schoolchildren.
Kubota Beisen
1852–1906

The Bravery of Captain Matsuzaki Nao’omi at Anseong Crossing in Korea during the Sino-Japanese War
1895

Six-panel folding screen; ink and color on silver-leaf paper
Saint Louis Art Museum, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Charles A. Lowenhaupt, 1059:2010.1

This pair of screens depicts an event that occurred during the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895) in the Battle of Seonghwan in July of 1894. Fording the Anseong River on the Korean Peninsula, Japanese forces, led by Captain Matsuzaki, visible in the right screen, launched a nighttime attack on the Chinese—the first major land skirmish of the war. Matsuzaki, who died in the attack, became one of many Meiji-period war heroes whose bravery and service were touted by the government in both print propaganda and textbooks.

Beisen trained as a painter in Kyoto under Suzuki Hyakunen (1825–1891) and later became an artist-correspondent for the Kokumin shinbun (The People’s
Newspaper), a position that sent him overseas for major events like the Sino-Japanese War and international fairs, including the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1889 and the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago.

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Navigating Changing Seas

The people of Japan long valued the sea as a source of protection, sustenance, and artistic inspiration. Under the shoguns' isolationist foreign policy, only limited international trade at the port of Nagasaki was possible. All this changed in 1853, when American Commodore Matthew Perry used the threat of military force to formalize diplomatic relations with Japan. From 1853 until 1867, the government and economy were thrown into turmoil as foreigners continued to arrive. As they established trading settlements in ports such as Yokohama, curiosity grew about these so-called barbarians from across the seas. Artists incorporated aspects of these exotic imports into their work. With the collapse of the shogunate in 1868, the new Meiji government actively encouraged travel in pursuit of technologies to transform and modernize Japan.

Perhaps the greatest shift in Japan’s relationship with the sea came with the establishment of the Imperial Navy in 1869. Over the course of the Meiji period, the government grew rapidly in size and strength. During the first Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895) and Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905), warships, often known by name, were celebrated in woodblock prints, photographs, and lithographs. The seas, it would seem, were once again a symbol of protection—and colonial ambition.
Meiji art also abounds in nostalgic imagery of fish and fishermen, and representations of water-related myths, such as the magic, tide-controlling jewels described in legends. Artists used these ocean motifs from Japan’s historical past to simultaneously reference Japan’s ancient history (with reputedly unbroken sovereignty) and highlight its glorious present and future.
Minami Kunzō
1883–1960

Observation Tower
1911

Polychrome woodblock print (nishiki-e)
Collection of Charles H. Mottier

Observation Tower was created just after Minami Kunzo returned to Japan from his time studying art in Great Britain and traveling through Europe. Here, Minami translates European watercolor techniques into a Japanese woodblock print. The topography of the craggy terrain is carved out with nishiki-e printing techniques, using a separate woodblock for each plane of monochromatic color, while the hand-wiped gradient of the sky and sparing use of black for emphasis depart from traditional techniques to create a luminous effect. With his enthusiasm for Henri Rivière’s (1864–1951) nostalgic scenes of French country life, Minami depicts a fisherman’s outpost (uomi) overlooking the Seto Inland Sea, a familiar coastline near his native Hiroshima. Isolated, remote, and ever watchful, Observation Tower finds the border between the known and unknown—the familiar and the foreign—at the juncture of land and sea.
—Lucia Neirotti, PhD Student, Art History

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Attributed to Terasaki Kōgyō
1866–1919

Seaside Bathing from The Pledge of Izumo
circa 1900

Lithograph
Collection of David Libertson

While the genre of shunga (erotic pictures) existed in Japan for centuries, beginning in the mid-1890s these images were systematically censored or even destroyed. Meiji authorities worried about their international reception, fearing they would be viewed by contemporary Europeans and Americans as obscene.

Like most shunga, this print is unsigned; the typical attribution to Kōgyō is based on its stylistic similarities with his Bathing Beauty (Bijin no kaisuiyoku). In traditional shunga, the intimacy shared by the lovers is often juxtaposed with a voyeuristic element, usually another person (or even domestic animal) who watches. Indeed, the stylishly dressed couple in Kōgyō’s print are not alone; visible at right is the hat of a potential spectator who, at least for now, is facing the other direction. This third party is the subject of the humorous dialogue reproduced in the
lower left amid the waves. The woman pleads with her lover to return home for fear that someone might see them. He says that it is too late, he cannot stop, and she should “grab around my neck! This spot is unstable!” ---
Furuya Kōrin
1875–1910

Shoreline at Dusk
1910

Pair of six-panel folding screens; ink, gold, and mineral pigments on paper
Collection of Anne and John Collins

Furuya Kōrin assumed his artistic name as an homage to Ogata Kōrin (1658–1716), the painter after whom the Rinpa School is named. Furuya Kōrin studied with the modern master of Rinpa design, Kamisaka Sekka (1866–1942), as well as the yōga painter Asai Chū (1856–1907), who is known for his somber color palette of browns and greys.

This sweeping vista of birds, pine branches, and lavishly rendered fishnets is akin to the elegant printed design of books by both Kōrin and Sekka, in which natural motifs and quotidian objects are elevated and exalted through techniques like tarashikomi (in which a second layer of paint is applied before the first layer dries, literally “dropped in” or “drop by drop”), and lavish pigments, often gold and silver. In this way, an otherwise commonplace
scene of fishnets attains a timeless sense of luxury and elegance. While many artists of the Meiji period were fascinated by Japan’s modernization, others lamented the effects of industrialization on Japan’s natural coastline, which was transformed with the construction of modern naval ports.

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Minami Kunzō
1883–1960

Landscape (Seto Inland Sea)
1911

Polychrome woodblock print (nishiki-e)
Collection of Charles H. Mottier

This print appears to show the Seto Inland Sea near Minami’s family home in Hiroshima. After studying oil painting and watercolor at the Tokyo School of Fine Arts, Minami traveled to Great Britain with the artist and ceramicist Tomimoto Kenkichi (1886–1963). Both were so struck by the prints of Henri Rivière (1864–1951) that they immersed themselves in the production of woodblock prints after their return to Japan in 1910. Writing to Minami in 1911, Tomimoto said “When you go home [to visit your family] . . . I would also like to [come along] and make woodblock prints of the Seto Inland Sea.” In this print, the selective overprinting of charcoal-colored outlines defines land in the fore- and middle grounds, while translucent blues and lavenders are used for the water and distant hills.
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Ogata Gekkō  
1859–1920

General Ōdera Attacking the Hundred-Foot Cliff with All His Might  
1895

Polychrome woodblock print (nishiki-e) triptych  

During the First Sino-Japanese War, the Battle of Weihaiwei lasted from January 20 to February 12, 1895. Located in front of towering cliffs, Weihaiwei was a heavily fortified Chinese naval base. General Ōdera Yasuzumi (1846–1895), having taken control of the Chinese outpost atop the cliff, is shown in the center of the composition, gazing through binoculars at the approaching, yet heavily damaged, Japanese ships. The leg and trident of a deceased Chinese soldier is only slightly distinguishable through the artillery smoke that fills the scene, exploiting Gekkō’s signature use of hazy atmospheric shading. Standing to the left of the General is a figure who wears a derby hat and carries a pad of paper, likely a newspaper
correspondent or even artist, dispatched to record—and dramatize—developments on the battlefield.

Prints that identify specific soldiers and commemorate their acts were common during the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese wars. Government propagandists sought to transform select Meiji soldiers into celebrated heroes of war, not unlike the historic samurai featured in Edo-period woodblock prints.

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Terasaki Kōgyō  
1859–1920

Bathing Beauty, frontispiece from Bungei kurabu 9, no. 10  
1902–1903

Polychrome woodblock print (nishiki-e)  
Collection of E. Anthony Petrelli, F2008.3

This iconic print was created for the literary magazine Bungei kurabu and was reissued more than once, with different variations in the colors of the swimsuit, in the late Meiji and Taishō periods. A young beauty is shown contemplating at the beach in a shimauma, a close-fitting, striped bathing suit that was in fashion in Japan from the 1890s through the 1920s. The young woman displays her body for the viewer, in a pose evocative of the Renaissance contrapposto stance, which would have been mildly erotic for the public audience at the time. While she toys with the strap of her straw hat, the woman gazes off into the distance, leaving the viewer to speculate about her thoughts. This print calls to mind how middle-class women were newly seen as fashionable and intellectual consumers of the burgeoning market for European goods.
—Lauren Landry, MAPH ’25, Art History

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Utagawa Yoshikazu
Active 1850–1870

America: A Steamship in Motion
1861

Polychrome woodblock print (nishiki-e) triptych
Collection of David Libertson

Three American flags stand out vividly from the black-and-white color scheme of this woodblock-print triptych. It is populated by more than fifty figures, most or all of whom appear to be foreigners, including troops from the United States Navy. Subsequent to the production of this print, which flaunts American military and commercial power, European-made paddle steamers would be used on both sides of the Boshin War (1868–1869), which brought about the Meiji Restoration. Since the age of Suzuki Harunobu (1724–1770), color woodblock prints experimented with new strategies of using dark backgrounds to simulate the night sky. The black-and-white scheme of the present print triptych, however, which is accentuated by pale blue, red, and yellow, may instead be simulating the gray scale of engravings or photography as no lanterns or other signs of artificial illumination appear in
the print. On the ground, shadows create heightened realism.

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Yamamote Kanae
1882–1946

Woman on Deck
1912

Polychrome woodblock print (nishiki-e)
Collection of Charles H. Mottier

With an air of contemplation, melancholy, or ennui, a woman seen from behind rests her head and arm on the ship’s rail. The same carving technique of small gouges is used to represent multiple elements of the print’s design: sun dappling on the deck, a blue-on-white pattern on the woman’s robe, and the texture of the rigging. By the end of the Meiji period, the long, monotonous steamship ride—the necessary lull before reaching the excitement of foreign shores—became an increasingly common experience among the upper classes and of hopeful young innovators like Yamamoto.

The Creative Print (Sōsaku hanga) movement is most associated with the Taishō era but was rooted in the artistic and literary culture of late Meiji, when artists experimented with carving and printing their own blocks
instead of outsourcing the work to professional technicians.

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Ōkura Kōtō
1873–1912

The Great Naval Battle Outside the Harbor of Port Arthur: The Great Victory of Our Naval Forces on the Early Dawn of March 10, 1904

1904

Polychrome woodblock print (nishiki-e) hexaptych with flecked gofun pigment
Ackland Art Museum, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Ackland Fund, 2016.42.24a-f

Little is known about Ōkura aside from his study under the painter and print designer Ōkura/Ogata Gekkō (1859–1920), from whom he took his artist name. The shading effects in this print, especially the use of atmospheric grayscale and the pale outlines of the ships and waves, were also likely inherited from his teacher. Ōkura’s draughtsmanship emulates the soft, brushed lines of ink painting, a sharp contrast with the bright searchlights and the opaque white of the falling snow, created through scattered gofun (ground oyster shell and mica dust) pigment.
The subject of this print is a conflict between the Japanese and Russian navies, in which the Japanese sank two Russian battleships, an act visible on the left side of the composition. Print designers of the First Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese wars frequently heightened the drama and excitement of the skirmishes they depicted, both to emphasize Japanese heroism and military might and to entice buyers of woodblock prints. To convey the spectacles of the battlefield, which involved new and never-before-seen technologies, the designers would adopt images from earlier, Edo-period prints, such as explosions of fireworks.

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Utagawa Sadahide
1807–1873

Picture of Western Traders at Yokohama Transporting Merchandise
1861 (Man’en 2 / Bunkyū 1), 4th month
Publisher: Yamaguchiya Tōbei (Kinkōdō) (active circa 1843–1847)

Polychrome woodblock print (nishiki-e); ink and color on paper, vertical ōban triptych
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Edward S. Morse Memorial Fund, Frank B. Bemis Fund, and John Ware Willard Fund, 2021.110a–e

This large pentaptych by Sadahide teems with activity. The close-up point of view allows the artist not only to depict the exotic “black ships” from foreign lands but also to show the people working on and inside them. Bluish glass windows on the Russian ship at right permit a view into curtained rooms filled with foreign furniture and objects. The complex composition is a tour de force, cleverly designed to incorporate vessels from each of the five treaty nations. At the same time, the close crowding of the dark vessels can feel overwhelming and unsettling, and the flag on the British vessel at center appears
improbably large. In all, this is arguably one of the greatest and most daring prints ever published on Yokohama.
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Kobayashi Kiyochika
1847–1915

Moonlit Sea at Kawasaki
1877

Polychrome woodblock print (nishiki-e)
Minneapolis Institute of Art, Gift from the Collection of Edith and the Late John Payne, 2019.139.84

Two fully rigged ships signal to each other in the nighttime harbor as the moonlight struggles to emerge from thick clouds. Taking the position of the rowboat passengers on the glinting water, we imagine the loud, deep reverberation punctuating the darkness. This quietly sublime scene emphasizes a new world in which ocean-going ships from abroad have become a regular scene in Edo Bay, linking Japan to a global network of trade, news, and diplomacy. Interestingly, the ships seen here have no real counterparts: Kiyochika seems to have fused elements from pictures of merchant and military vessels.
Yokoyama Taikan
1868–1958

The Sea
circa 1904–1905

Unmounted painting; ink and light color on silk
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Edward Jackson Holmes
Collection—Bequest of Mrs. Edward Jackson Holmes,
64.2074

This painting presents an illusory approach to the
seascape genre. One does not know where they stand in
relationship to the sea. It places the viewer directly into the
thalassic core. This uncertainty of place is captured in the
nearly undiscernible horizon line, called motsusen or
buried line. It is one of several techniques that
characterize the late Meiji painting style known as mōrōtai
(hazy form). Mōrōtai, while judged unfavorably in Japan,
acquired near instant popularity among American
collectors. The ability to convey a close connection to
nature suggested to the American viewer a romantic
understanding of the exotic, mysterious East. For Taikan,
who traveled to the United States in 1904 where he
became even more exposed to Western oil and watercolor
painting, works such as The Sea, spurred his desire to
paint a unified, atmospheric environment that could enclose all other compositional elements.

—Alan Longino

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Yukihiro (for the Kinshodo Studio)

Wave Crest Supporting the Tide-Ruling Jewel
circa 1890

Rock crystal sphere supported by a silver, bronze, and gold wave crest
Private Collection, New York City

This sculpture embodies the intricate metalwork of the Meiji period. A polished spherical crystal controls the tides below from atop a base of smooth silver waves and rough bronze rocks. The spray of gold pearls delineates forceful currents. Such painstaking craftsmanship derives from the Edo period; while swords were outlawed in the nineteenth century, many Edo-period craftsmen transferred their sword-fitting skills to creating artworks like this sculpture.

This artwork also pays homage to older traditions. Juxtaposing earth and water honors the Japanese mythological story of the feud between Umi no Sachihiko (deity of the sea) and Yama no Sachihiko (deity of the land). Simultaneously, its original audience would have recognized thematic parallels to the Meiji-period Imperial Navy, which strove to control the seas just like this crystal.
—Minori Egashira, PhD Candidate ‘25, Art History

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Unidentified artist

Tide-Changing Jewel with Dragon
circa 1900

Silver, shakudō (copper and gold alloy), and crystal
The Cleveland Museum of Art, Bequest of Cornelia Blakemore Warner, 1947.682

The motif of dragons clutching pearls is derived originally from Tang-dynasty Chinese tales and is often associated with water or the power to bring rain, conveyed here in the swirling silver waves that support the largest rock crystal sphere. In Japan, the association of dragons with water persisted. Crystal orbs, especially during the Meiji period, were often presented as magical totems: kanju or nanju, the jewels controlling the flood- and ebb-tides, which appear in ancient texts and facilitated military victories overseas. Additional spheres are cradled in the waves or clutched by the dragon, who is covered in a dark black shakudō patina and has golden eyes and a red lacquer tongue.

Okimono (figures or small statues) like this one, in which the natural wonder of flawless rock crystal is combined with the manmade technical achievement of perfectly
hand-shaped silver, were popular among Victorians, who were experiencing a revival of spiritualism and mysticism.
Andō Jūbei
1876–1956

Vase with Open Work, Blossoming Cherry, Carp, and Stream
Early 20th century

Hirado Mikawachi ware; porcelain with underglaze blue and iron
Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Gift of Allan and Maxine Kurtzman, AC1997.273.56

The immense skill in the production and firing of this reticulated vase with an inner compartment was designed to impress and recalls sixteenth- to seventeenth-century Chinese porcelain examples. Here, the open work’s geometrical intensity is mitigated by the organic fluidity of the fish swimming among fallen cherry blossoms. Designs of carp swimming among the swirling contour lines of a stream were extremely popular for both two- and three-dimensional objects in the Meiji era. Many were acquired by European and American collectors beginning in the 1870s and provided a foundation for the undulating lines of the Art Nouveau movement.

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Andō Jūbei
1876–1956

Vase with Raised Spiny Lobster Decoration
circa 1910

Cloissoné enamel
Private Collection, New York City

While the design on this vase may appear simple—repeated ise ebi (spiny lobsters) on a solid red background—it is extremely challenging to create large expanses of unbroken cloisonné enamel without the stability of numerous wired cloisons. Equally difficult is the execution of the carefully delineated carapaces and legs of each crustacean in moriage (raised) enamels, a technique that requires the delicate polishing and shaping of each limb, eye, and tiny spike of the lobsters’ shells. A prominent enamel maker, Andō was also a brilliant businessman who employed skillful artisans in his Nagoya workshop. Having lived and studied abroad in Europe, he was known even in the Meiji period to be well versed in the tastes and trends of the era, as the refined and modern design of this vase shows.

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Mizuno Toshikata
1866–1908

Japanese Warships Fire on the Enemy near Haiyang Island
1894

Polychrome woodblock print (nishiki-e)

The composition of this print of sailors firing a large gun is based on an 1889 wood engraving designed by William Overend (1851–1898) and published in the Illustrated London News: even the depicted military equipment, a great gun that can be moved along a curved track, appears to have been copied from the British print. While several artists were sent to the Sino-Japanese War front, the majority supplemented news reports with pictorial sources and their own imaginations.

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Fashioning the Self

During the Meiji period the concept of the self was widely regarded as twofold, consisting of a public, outwardly facing half—one's public appearance and behavior—and a private, predominantly concealed half—one's personal feelings and emotions. Self-presentation was further complicated by the government’s self-conscious efforts, through legislation, decree, or imperial example, to present a modern and civilized society. New Meiji laws and policies did offer, at least to some, greater freedom and social mobility when compared with the rigid status system and sumptuary laws of the Edo period. Against this backdrop of social change (and increased imports from abroad), fashion began to evolve. In the 1870s and 1880s official uniforms were established; it was declared that the new, Western-style formal wear of suits and trousers was actually similar to the styles of the Emperor Jimmu, the legendary first emperor of Japan. For women, courtly formal wear was also based on European models. After 1886, the Empress, along with her entourage, was seen in public only in Western dress. Other forms of coded dress for women also emerged, such as hakama pants, which indicated employment in a factory or silk mill or, when worn over a kimono, that the wearer was a student or a teacher. With increased silk production, the rise of department stores, and increased imports, even ordinary
people were able to express a modern sense of cosmopolitanism. Accessories such as rings, Western-style umbrellas, bowler and top hats, and Victorian shawls and scarves were often worn with traditional haori jackets and kimono.
Depictions of the Meiji emperor almost always conformed to the likeness depicted in his official portraits, which included his black-and-gold brocade uniform and a feathered hat. In contrast, portraits of Empress Haruko exhibited a greater variety of dress, though she was typically shown in formal French dresses, as she is here. While it broadcasts itself as reportage of contemporary events, this scene, like so many prints from the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895), is far from the historical reality; in truth, the couple arrived at Shinbashi Station hours apart. Woodblock print designers and publishers of the period competed with other forms of printed media,
such as lithography and photography, which were comparatively inexpensive and faster to produce. In an effort to meet public demand and hasty deadlines, many print designers fabricated their coverage of current events by dramatizing scenes or even releasing prints in anticipation of major battles and other events.
Toyohara Kunichika
1835–1900

Lineup of Five of Your Favorite Actors
1882

Polychrome woodblock print (nishiki-e) pentaptych

All five actors—in character as toughs, villians, and anti-heroes with names like “Jirokichi the Viper”—wear sumptuous clothes and tote Western-style umbrellas. Besides casting these akumono or “bad guys” as icons of imaginative fashion, the illustrated clothes are a showcase of masterful printmaking techniques, for instance in the carefully masked splatter effect on the rightmost figure. The Western umbrellas, substituting here for the traditional paper and bamboo umbrellas which were a common prop on the kabuki stage, simultaneously accentuate the characters’ imposing forms and accessorize their fashionable outfits with a touch of modernity.

Hayakawa Shōkosai (Hayakawa Togoro)
1815–1897

Bowler Hat

circa 1890

Bamboo, rattan, leather, and lacquer

Minneapolis Institute of Art, The Mary Griggs Burke Endowment Fund established by The Mary Livingston Griggs and Mary Griggs Burke Foundation, 2018.17.1

Of noble lineage, Shōkosai studied bamboo weaving and plaiting in Kyoto before moving to Osaka. By the Meiji period he had emerged as a true innovator in the art of bamboo, developing entirely new forms and techniques. In an unprecedented act he began to embed a signed plaque, reading Dai Nihon Shōkosai, or Shōkosai of Great Japan, in his works, thus making a name, literally and figuratively, for himself. By the 1880s Shōkosai began to experiment with hats, which were made popular by Ichikawa Danjūrō IX (1838–1903), the foremost kabuki actor of the time, who began to wear the artist’s hats in public. Soon Shōkosai’s hats were considered markers of the most fashionable men of the period, depicted frequently in urban scenes, including prints by Kiyochika,
where they are shown worn with traditional kimono as a modern and sophisticated accessory.

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Kawanabe Kyōsai
1831–1889

Anatomical Illustrations of Front-Facing Man and Rear-Facing Man, from Kyōsai’s Treatise on Painting (Kyōsai gadan), vol. 1
1887

Woodblock-printed book
The Lavenberg Collection of Japanese Prints

These woodblock illustrations helped to disseminate European anatomical drawings to a wide audience within Japan. The artist, Kawanabe Kyōsai, was trained in the traditional Kano school but here skillfully reproduces the shading on the body of the man and on his skeleton. The genitalia are conveniently elided by the well of the bound book.

Kyōsai’s inscription on the rear-facing man reads:

“My student, the Englishman Seii [Josiah] Conder (1852–1920), gave me an oil painting from his country. Because its skeletal structure accords with the principles of life sketching of people in our country, I present it here.”
Esteemed general Saigō Takamori (1828–1877) was one of the founders of the new Meiji government, but in 1877 he died (likely by assisted suicide) after leading a failed rebellion of former samurai in Kyūshū. Despite his ultimate status as an enemy of the government, he attracted profound sympathy and respect from the people. In the 1890s the government commissioned Takamura Kōun (1852–1934) to design a commemorative bronze statue of Saigō, which still stands in Ueno Park, Japan’s first public park.

This print triptych shows fashionable individuals who have come to the park to enjoy the cherry blossoms and view the new statue. The young boys in this picture would have
been too young to recall Saigō or the rebellion he led. This scene thus underscores the rapid changes that took place between 1868 and 1899 and the new government’s efforts to shape history and memory.
Design Department (Zuanbu), Mitsukoshi Department Store

Established in 1904

Garment Designs

Early 20th century

Hand-painted paper book with fabric covers
Collection of Lisa Pevtzow

This hand-painted volume presents design options for young women’s furisode (long-sleeved kimono), which would have been made to order to the client’s specifications. Spring and early summer flowers blossom across the vivid purple robe shown here, accompanied by a design of hand-drums. Tissue-paper inserts indicate the possibility of substituting different motifs, including a bundle of maple leaves.

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Hashiguchi Gōyō
1880–1921

Nude
1904

Oil on canvas
Darrel C. Karl Collection

Today Goyō is best known for his sensual and elegant New Print (Shin-hanga) movement wood-block prints of beauties, but he studied both nihonga (Japanese-style painting) and oil painting in his youth. He left few surviving works in oil, making this an exceedingly rare and important example of his painting practice. The inscription on the back of the frame dedicates this work to the yōga (Western-style) painter Asai Chū (1856–1907), with whom Goyō worked. The woman sits facing left, illuminated from the right as if in an artist’s studio. This composition of a nude silhouetted against a wall is also seen in the artist’s drawings. However, this carefully shaded painting reveals that even his famous woodblock-printed beauties, while rendered with unmodulated planes of color and a remarkable economy of means, were founded on the artist’s ample experience of life-sketching.
Utagawa Kunimasa III
1773–1810

Board Game (Sugoroku) of Looking Out from the Cloud-Topping Pavillion (Ryōunkaku), Asakusa Park
1890
Publisher: Fukuda Kumajirō (active circa 1874–1898)

Woodblock print with collage elements on medium-thick laid paper
Minneapolis Institute of Art, Mary Griggs Burke Collection, Gift of the Mary and Jackson Burke Collection, 2015.79.235

At roughly 226 feet in height, the Ryōunkaku (Cloud-Surpassing Tower) was the tallest building in Tokyo from 1890, when it opened, until it was destroyed in the Great Kantō Earthquake of 1923. It was designed by the Scottish professor, engineer, and oyatoi gaikokujin (foreign employee of the Meiji government) William K. Burton (1856–1899). Rising twelve stories above the Asakusa district, the building contained a variety of stores, a lounge, observation decks, and even an art gallery, making it an important public space during the Meiji period and the subject of popular cultural fascination. In addition
to the many retailers within the Asakusa Jyūni (the Asakusa Twelve-Story), as it was colloquially known, the tower contained Japan’s first elevator and was entirely illuminated with electric lights.

Kunimasa made this print as the field for sugoroku (board games), in which players would advance up the tower. The cleverly designed prints, consisting of two layered sheets with the top folding open, shows both the building’s Gothic Revival exterior and the exciting spaces within it, revealed as players advance up the towers—presumably in the Pavilion’s elevator.

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The Balloonist: Palace on High People Are Talking About
1891

Polychrome woodblock print (nishiki-e) triptych
Collection of Roland L. Oliver

As part of the opening festivities for the twelve-story Ryōunkaku Tower, the English balloonist Percival Spencer rose a reported 3,500 feet in a balloon in Ueno Park and, jumping out, parachuted to the ground. This print triptych commemorates a kabuki play in which Onoe Kikugorō V (1844–1903), in the role of the famous raconteur San’yūtei Enchō (1839–1900), addressed the audience in English:

“Ladies and gentlemen, I have [sic] up at least three thousand feet. Looking down from that fearful height, my heart was tilted with joy to see so many of my friends in this Kabuki-za. Thank you, ladies and gentlemen, with all my heart, I thank you.”
In this way, the kabuki theater continued to address topical themes and celebrate the milestones and festivities of the growing city of Tokyo.
In this image, a woman is wearing a hōmongi (visiting coat), a simplified version of formal kimono that became popular during the Meiji period. Typically worn at festive occasions by well-to-do married women, they often were made in muted colors with minimal decoration. Here, the woman has excused herself to use a telephone; the novel machine, its shiny bells printed in a metallic pigment, might be the costar of this print.

First introduced to Japan in the late 1870s, the telephone was initially reserved for government use only. However, following the completion of telephone lines between Tokyo and Yokohama, the device soon became available to the public and proved immediately popular. By 1903, the date of this print design, many wealthy Japanese households
had them. The modern device, perhaps as much as the woman’s beauty, seems to have fascinated the artist.

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Mitsutani Kunishirō
1874–1936

Flowers
circa 1910

Oil on canvas
Private collection

A modern exploration of the genre of bijinga (pictures of beauties), this naturalistic rendering of a listless young woman, immersed in nature and unaware of the spectator’s gaze, is typical of Japanese Western-style painting (yōga) from the late 1890s onward, inspired in part by the voyeuristic portraiture of contemporary European salon painting. Mitsutani’s painting also reveals how, despite its rapid modernization, later Meiji society often viewed women as aesthetic objects of the past, encouraging them to dress in traditional kimono and cultivate classical feminine pursuits. Mitsutani was associated with the subdued tonality of “old school” Western-style painting, as can be seen here in the black-brown shadows. Shortly after he painted this work, however, Mitsutani would adopt a radical new direction, pursuing a flat, decorative aesthetic inspired by the works of Post-Impressionist artists, including Paul Cézanne.
(1839–1906) and Paul Gauguin (1848–1903). He would later travel to Paris and the United States as he continued to hone his style.
Hashiguchi Gōyō
1880–1921

This Beauty (Kono bijin) Poster for Mitsukoshi
1911

Color lithograph
Darrel C. Karl Collection

In Japan, modern department stores rose to prominence in the late Meiji period by presenting themselves as centers not only of commerce but also of culture. This poster was based on an oil painting that was awarded first prize in a contest run by the Mitsukoshi Department Store. To reproduce the painting’s colors, the poster underwent over thirty different passes through the printing press.

A young lady with a bouffant hairstyle and dark blue kimono sits on a bench adorned with stylized Art Nouveau motifs. In her hands—on one of which is a ring—she holds an album of Edo-period woodblock prints. By combining motifs of modern and traditional Japan with the global Art Nouveau movement, Goyō presents a modern woman who, he implies, easily holds her own against the Edo-period beauties of ukiyo-e, just as newly available color
lithography vies with and subsumes traditional woodblock-print techniques.
Toyohara Chikanobu
1838–1912

Young Girl Under a Parasol, from the series True Beauty
1897

Polychrome woodblock print (nishiki-e)
Collection of David Libertson

In this print, Chikanobu explores the genre of bijinga (pictures of beauties) in the light of the changing fashions and customs of the Meiji period; indeed, the young woman’s social role, if not her identity, can be discerned by her style and accessories. She carries a European-style umbrella, here covered with a burnished design, and wears a but-ton-up, check-patterned shirt beneath her elabo-rate and feminine kimono. She also clutches what appears to be a leather-bound book and wears a ring on her ring finger.

The design of the book and presence of the ring might suggest a married woman clutching a bible—a possibility following the repeal of Edo-period prohibitions against Christianity. Her long hair, worn down, however, implies that she is young and single, so it is most likely that she is
a schoolgirl who, like other young women of the later Meiji period, has adopted Western accessories and styles while retaining somewhat traditional dress.
Unidentified artist

Court Uniform for Imperial Appointee
circa 1887

Wool with gold brocade, sword, hat with ostrich feathers, and lacquered wooden case
The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Collection of Dr. John Stroehlein and Miwa Sakashita

Court and military uniforms in emulation of European ensembles were officially adopted by the Japanese government in 1872. The intricate gold brocade that adorns the woolen jacket features extensive use of the paulownia crest, which was adopted during the Meiji period as a seal representing the imperial government. The outer leaves of the paulownia are separated into five sections, and the central leaf is split into seven parts, indicative here of the highest rank of imperial appointee.

This ensemble belonged to Sano Tsunetami (1822–1902), a leading Meiji statesman, founder of the Japanese Red Cross and creator of the Ryūchikai (Japan Art Association), who received the title of viscount (shishaku) in 1887.

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Unidentified artist

Outer Robe with Heian Courtly Motifs: Carriage, Shell Game, Insect Cage, Butterflies, Boat, and Crest

circa 1880s–1890s

Silk, yūzen (paste) dyed with embroidery
Collection of Lisa Pevtzow

The outer robe (uchikake) with a padded, trailing hem was a formal garment worn at the new year and at young ladies’ coming of age ceremonies and weddings. It typically bore elaborate embroidery with auspicious designs and bright colors. From the mid-1880s onward, however, a new style of uchikake with more restrained decoration and muted colors became popular as part of a trend of understated elegance. Courtly motifs and winter scenes evoking the learned women of the Heian aristocracy are dyed and embroidered with great delicacy. The snow harmonizes with the robe’s gentle lavender-gray hue. In the Meiji era, the availability of new dyes along with the introduction of European color theories led to an explosion of new shades. Grays were especially favored for their versatility. Previously, dye derived from ink was
used to produce these shades, but experimentation with synthetic dyes opened up a new realm of possibilities. ---
Unidentified artist

Kimono with Blossoming Plum, Willow Bridge, and Figures
1890–1915

Resist-dyed silk crepe (chirimen) embroidered with silk and metallic threads
Collection of Lisa Pevtzow

Double-layered plum blossoms and willow branches adorn the mustard-colored sleeves and upper portion of this kimono. In the lower portion an arched bridge frames the encounter between two gorgeously attired figures: a young boy with a flute and a veiled young woman with a branch of white chrysanthemums. Their garments, the blue waves, and the shaded ground on which they stand are intricately dyed with the paste-resist (yūzen) method and embellished with embroidered accents. The figures likely represent Ushiwakamaru (the warrior Yoshitsune as a boy) and Lady Jōruri, who would fall in love with each other.

This garment represents the range of dyes that became available in the Meiji era, when countless hues were generated from newly available chemical and organic
colorants. The stylish figures, fluid lines, and delicate shading of the bridge and water reflect the refined artistic sensibility of the artists who worked in the textile industry.
Below:

Kobayashi Kiyochika
1847–1915

Imperial Visit to a Field Hospital
1895

Polychrome woodblock print (nishiki-e)
Collection of David Libertson

Public appearances by Empress Haruko became an important tool for the Imperial Household Agency in establishing the royal family as central to the governance of the nation. They were vital for maintaining the country’s morale and patriotism in the face of wartime misfortune and sacrifice, which is subtly alluded to by Kiyochika at the left of the triptych, where a wounded soldier, wrapped almost entirely in bandages, can be seen bowing to the empress. Many war prints greatly embellished the realities of the time, but Empress Haruko did visit field hospitals frequently.

Mostly likely, this print depicts the field hospital in the train station at Hiroshima, which was staffed by nurses from the Japanese Red Cross. They, too, pay fealty to the visiting
empress and her ladies-in-waiting, all of whom wear European-style dresses. The many folds of their gowns and possibly the sheen of the silk provide Kiyochika with an opportunity to experiment with volumetric shading and vivid aniline colors.

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A female student stands elegantly against an art-nouveau styled background adorned with patterns of flowing water. Clad in the ebicha shikibu style—a popular attire among female students—with a Western hair style known as sokuhatsu, the student wears hakama trousers designed for females, allowing comfortable seating in chairs while adhering to the 1883 Ministry of Education edict that prohibited men’s attire in girl’s schools.

In Meiji Japan, the term jogakusei emerged to describe female students, aged twelve to seventeen, who attended
all-girls’ secondary schools. The promulgation of the Girl’s Secondary School Ordinance in 1899 aimed to promote female secondary education nationwide to foster a modern female identity aligned with the government’s ideal of the “good wife and wise mother,” as advocated by the education minister in 1899. This quiet and well-mannered student represents an idealized female image envisioned by the patriarchal Meiji government, symbolizing the new role women were expected to assume in the modern era.

—Yuheng Deng, MAPH, Art History

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Below:

Tomioka Eisen
1864–1905

Frontispiece for Hidden in the Deep Mountains
from Bungei kurabu 6, no. 16
1900

Polychrome woodblock print (nishiki-e)
Collection of Paul and Barbara Schwartz, Houston, TX

A classic trope of kuchi-e (frontispieces) and their stories is the ever-widening divide between urban and rural Japan during the Meiji period. This distinction, just like those of social class, is encoded in the clothing of the couple in Hidden in the Deep Mountains. The story recounts the romance between the sophisticated teacher from the city, with his hat, tailored suit, and rakish mustache, and the sincere country girl, whose kimono and head covering communicate her innocence as a simple girl from a rural region, somehow sheltered from the modernization and changes taking place in urban Japan.

While Eisen trained as a painter under Kano Eitoku (1814–1892), he found his greatest success with his
illustrations for newspapers and novels. He was renowned especially for the accuracy of his depictions of the latest fashions, especially for his male characters, and was known to frequent department stores like Mitsukoshi and Shirokiya to study the newest trends in clothing.
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Above:

Tomioka Eisen
1864–1905

Frontispiece for White-Robed Kannon by Chizuka Reisui, from Bungei kurabu 6, no. 11
1900

Polychrome woodblock print (nishiki-e)
Collection of Paul and Barbara Schwartz, Houston, TX

White-Robed Kannon tells the story of a romance doomed by debt, another cautionary tale for the modern era, marked by the unprecedented transformation of the Japanese economy. In the tale, the main character is not allowed to marry her beau, who is a struggling artist, as her family has been rendered destitute, swindled by a loan shark. In this dramatic kuchi-e (frontispiece) to the story, Eisen efficiently communicates the couple’s social roles, superimposing them against a red background, a foreign import not used in Japanese ink painting, to convey both the new (and thus risky) nature of the artist’s career while also adding a touch of stylish modernity. Eisen was celebrated especially for his depictions of male characters, who were often very fashionable and strikingly handsome.
Below:

Takeuchi Keishū
1861–1943

Awakening, frontispiece for The Scent of Her Robes, The Breeze of Her Fan by Bizan Kawakami, from Bungei kurabu 4, no. 10
1898

Polychrome woodblock print (nishiki-e)
Collection of Paul and Barbara Schwartz, Houston, TX

In many kuchi-e (frontispieces), fashion was used to distinguish social class and roles, distinctions emphasized by the often sentimental or even tragic tales of unrequited or unrealized love, usually tied by the authors of stories known as kannen shōsetsu (“idea” or “concept” stories) to the ills caused by rapid social changes of the Meiji period. A similar sentiment pervades this design, in which a man in the foreground sporting a brimmed hat and suit, indications of his success as a businessman, gazes out at a woman who is surrounded by performers. She, according to the story, was his one true love, but he could not marry her as she dishonored herself by serving as a mistress to a foreigner to pay off her family’s debts. Born
of noble lineage, Keishū was a self-taught artist who designed frontispieces as well as newspaper inserts and illustrations. His style, with its characteristic softness and smooth lines, is often contrasted with that of Yoshitoshi (1839–1892) and he was regarded as pioneering a new style of illustration during the later Meiji Period.
Mizuno Toshikata
1866–1908

Outdoor Sketch, frontispiece from Bungei kurabu 9, no. 9
1903

Polychrome woodblock print (nishiki-e)
Collection of Paul and Barbara Schwartz, Houston, TX

Outdoor Sketch is a frontispiece for the literary magazine Bungei kurabu, which was popular among young women. In this cover print, Mizuno rendered the modern femininity with the portrayal of a fashionable art student adorned with the hisashigami hairstyle, which was popularized by the actress Sadayakkoo around 1897. She carries a Western-style umbrella probably bought in a newly built department store to show her vogue. A modified version of hakama pants grants her greater mobility to comfortably sit on the field and concentrate on drawing. Discarding the traditional way of painting with brushes, this young artist is ready to sketch en plein air with only a pencil on hand.

—Xiao Wei, MAPH ‘25, Art History
Mizuno Toshikata
1866–1908

Newspaper Extra, frontispiece from Bungei kurabu 10, no. 6
1903

Polychrome woodblock print (nishiki-e)
Collection of Paul and Barbara Schwartz, Houston, TX

Declared his heir apparent in ukiyo-e by the Tsukioka Yoshitoshi (1839–1892), Toshikata was a prolific artist and teacher, and notably accepted several female students in his studio. He worked as a painter, print designer, and in-house artist for different newspapers and publishers, designing kuchi-e (frontispieces) like this one for different novelists, as well as sashi-e, or newspaper inserts, like the one this woman is shown holding.

Widespread female literacy in Meiji Japan was the result of Imperial Decrees on Education that, for the first time, formally included girls. While the cosmopolitanism of Toshikata’s subject is implied by her literacy and apparent interest in contemporary events, her clothing reflects the
typical everyday dress of the Meiji period, with its somber colors and restrained decoration—a contrast to the frilly dresses and bright colors in popular prints.
Unidentified artist

Jinriki

circa 1890

Hand-colored albumen print mounted on board
The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, The
University of Chicago, Gift of Jennifer and Isaac Goldman
2015.24

Two young women in kimono with broad satin collars—a utilitarian feature designed to hide wear—sit in a jinrikisha (rickshaw) on a verdant path accompanied by a pusher and puller. The rickshaw, literally “human-powered” cart, was invented in Japan in 1869 following the lifting of an Edo-period ban on wheeled vehicles. This photograph was originally part of an album of typical Japanese scenes marketed to foreign tourists under the name of Adolfo Farsari (1841–1898), who directed a team of Japanese photographers, assistants, and colorists. Lightly eroticized through their body contact and shared umbrella, the young women figure into a vast body of Euro-American literary and visual portrayals of the young Japanese woman or mousmé as submissive and alluring.

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Sanjū Saku Co. of Tokyo and Yokohama
active Meiji period

The “Brown Sherman” Tea and Coffee Service
circa 1900–1902

Pure (jungin) silver with cloisonné enameling with ivory
The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Museum purchase
funded by Mr. and Mrs. Laurence C. Burns, 2022.193.1–.5

The Sanjū Saku Co. was known for making export silver, finely crafted from pure jungin silver and often featuring quintessentially Japanese designs that would appeal to Victorian Westerners. This example is covered with raised and engraved details, including wisteria, songbirds, and stylized bamboo handles. The perceived “Japanese-ness” of the set is further enhanced by the sugar container, which takes the form of a Japanese handled water bucket.

This set and its history reveal the reach of fine Japanese craft across the seas and indeed across the United States: the base of each piece has a different dedicatory inscription, which represent different members of the Sherman family of Newport, Rhode Island, including Sophia August Brown Sherman (1867–1947), the granddaughter of the founder of Brown University and the
apparent recipient of the set, which was given to her by her husband, the financier and casino tycoon William Watts Sherman (1842–1912) and the couple’s daughters. Each piece is also marked with the location, occasion, and date of the gift exchange: “Pasadena, Christmas 1902.”
Lapel pins and cuff links, along with buttons and belt buckles, were among the most commonly exported Japanese cloisonné enamels during the Meiji period. With the adoption of Western-style dress and the implementation of official uniforms, cuff links like the ones shown here became commonplace, and many different cloisonné designers created all manner of small fashionable accessories. While it is unclear if this lapel pin was made for a specific celebration of U.S.–Japan relations, it bears the stamp of the famed gem and watch
importer Tenshōdō. Though small in size, this pin showcases Japan’s sophisticated techniques and the international cosmopolitanism of a changing era.

These small objects reflect both the major social changes of the Meiji period, when men and women began to mix Western accessories with Japanese clothing, and the continuation of the traditions of the Edo period, when workshops turned out fashionable accessories made with precise detail and luxurious materials.

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Onchi Kōshirō
1891–1955

Self-Portrait
Front, 1908; back, 1914

Oil on canvas
Elias Martin Collection

Celebrated as one of Japan’s greatest avant-garde artists, Onchi’s initial commitment to figurative oil painting is often overlooked, and this double-sided self-portrait offers a rare insight into his early career. The earlier portrait was likely painted before 1910, when he began his formal training in the preparatory program of the Tokyo School of Fine Arts. His bright impasto brushwork and youthful visage asserts a confident vision. Bathed in light, he faces the viewer head on. In contrast, the later portrait reflects a weary artist who struggled to conform to the academicism of the art school, which he left by 1915 to pursue his own path. At the Tokyo School of Fine Arts, the mandatory course in self-portraiture was intended to hone skills in observation and naturalism, though for Onchi, the genre was a form of expressive self-affirmation, to “expand and impassion myself when my life is on the verge of crisis.”
Unidentified artist

Fireman’s Coat
1875–1900

Cotton, plain weave, quilted, painted
Art Institute of Chicago, Gift of the James D. Tigerman Estate, 2006.159

In the Edo and Meiji periods, fireman’s jackets were quilted for warmth and protection. They could be worn with the hand-painted imagery on the inside or outside. This jacket is decorated with the image of the kabuki character Tenjiku Tokubei, who evades capture by conjuring a giant toad with the “toad magic” he learned overseas.

This legendary character who achieved wealth and power through his foreign travels presumably developed added resonance in the Meiji era. Further, Tokubei’s most famous scene was called the “house-breaking” (yatai kowashi), echoing the firefighters’ expert dismantling of wooden houses in the path of a fire in order to deprive it of fuel. Some plays involving Tokubei also dazzled audiences with a quick-change scene involving water onstage. Water-related designs were always popular choices for such jackets.

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Matsui Tōshū
active Meiji period

Matayori Album, vol. 2
1890–1915
Publisher: Unsōdō (established in 1891)

Woodblock-printed book
Collection of Lisa Pevtzow

Unidentified artist

Nagoya Obi with Six Poetic Immortals Design
Late Meiji period (after 1900)

Silk with woven design
Collection of Lisa Pevtzow

Even after the emperor’s relocation to Tokyo, Kyoto remained the center of Japan’s textile industry, and many artists contributed designs for kimono fabric. From the 1890s to 1910s, woodblock-printed books known as zuanchō provided design ideas for custom-made garments. This sash (obi) contains a hand-woven design of the Six Poetic Immortals (Rokkasen) playfully represented as roundels or as temari (cloth handballs).
The very similar design appears in the Matayori Album, whose color printing in turn resembles pale, loosely brushed ink with color washes.
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Making History, Enshrining Myth

Meiji art abounds with historical, mythological, and religious (Buddhist and Shintō) subject matter. Such themes were already a central part of Japanese art and culture in the preceding Edo period, yet the Meiji approach to history and myth was new in several ways. First, Japanese artists, patrons, and government officials understood the high Euro-American regard for these themes and agreed that they played important social and political roles edifying the public and fostering a sense of shared national belonging.

Images of the distant past also provided artists with opportunities to surpass the ancients by rendering familiar narratives with greater realism or immediacy. Subjects such as dragons or demons appear to have been especially popular in Europe and America, and Japanese artists capitalized on foreigners’ exotic visions of their country. Domestic Meiji audiences, too, were fascinated by supernatural themes. Artists, performers, and writers updated the occult, drawing on changing circumstances in the everyday world.

In these ways, Japanese artists and patrons expressed their modernity even—and especially—while depicting the past.
Ichiyōsai Yoshitaki
1841–1899

Eight Actors from Tale of the Southwestern Dream
1886

Polychrome woodblock print (nishiki-e)

These prints record a play about the Satsuma Rebellion (1877) entitled Tale of the Southwestern Dream, performed in the Ebisu theater in Osaka, 1878. The play, which dramatized the conflict only months after it ended, centered on real persons, flimsily concealed under slightly altered names: Saigō Takamori (1828–1877), famous leader of the rebellion, is depicted in the play as Saijō Takanori (third from the right, romantically portrayed in an exquisite Western-style military dress uniform). The cherubim motif on the title cartouche (leftmost print), originally borrowed from Dutch books and contemporaneously used in newspaper prints, emphasizes that the play was “ripped from the headlines.”
Although the prints show eight characters, there are only six actors: Arashi Rikan IV and his pupil, Arashi Rishō II, performed two characters each, one male and one female (the fourth and eighth panels from the right are Rikan, while the fifth and seventh are Rishō). This kind of casting, featuring the cross-gender acting breadth of a master-pupil pair, would have been a draw for fans of the kabuki theater and its celebrity culture.

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Imao Keinen and Morizumi Isana
1845–1924; 1856–1928

Festival Procession (Aoi Matsuri)
1890–1893
Manufacturer: Kawashima Jinbei II (1853–1910), for Kawashima Textile Company

Silk, metallic threads
Indianapolis Museum of Art at Newfields, Gift of Otto Gresham, 30.503

This hand-woven tapestry was a special gift in 1896 from the Emperor of Japan to the family of Indiana resident Walter Quintin Gresham (1832–1895), U.S. Secretary of State under President Grover Cleveland. The Kyoto painter Imao Keinen, a specialist in Japanese and Chinese styles, designed the underdrawing, while the oil painter Tamura Sōryū was commissioned to draw the figures in order to imbue them with greater realism. Kawashima Jinbei II, the producer, arrived at the idea of using Japanese silk thread to emulate the French Gobelins style of handwoven tapestry with decorative borders that he encountered in France, where he had traveled to learn about power looms and other aspects of modern European textile production. This tapestry, sent to
the United States in the wake of Japan’s victory in the first Sino-Japanese War, represents a combination of Japanese, Chinese, and European elements. It was exhibited at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1896, shortly after its arrival in the Midwest.

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Aoki Tomonobu (Ichiryū)
Active Meiji period

Censer in the Form of a Hawk
circa 1895

Silver, shibuichi, shakudō, black-and gold lacquer, and silk cord

This lifelike tour de force of patinated metalwork references the association of falconry and the warlords of Japan’s past; at the same time, as with the other raptors in this gallery, its power and grandeur also serve as an indirect metaphor for Meiji Japan’s soaring strength and sharp tactics. The ends of the perch bear the emperor’s chrysanthemum seal, which was created and codified only after the Meiji Restoration. The bird is hollow and has a silver-lined insert for incense; three feathers on its back are raised to release the scented smoke, which would have swirled around the censer, enhancing its mystique.

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Nemoto
Active Meiji period

Seal Case (Inrō) with Skeleton Procession Design
circa 1890

Shibayama-style kinji gold lacquer with encrustation of nacre, tortoiseshell; ivory, coral, horn; silver mounts; and gilt signature plaque
Private Collection, New York City

This inrō—a small portable case worn on the sash and anchored by a netsuke—features inlays of sumptuous materials including coral, mother of pearl, and ivory, typical of the Shibayama style of wood inlay. On one side, skeletons and demons carry a palanquin, while on the other, living itinerant musicians rest by a stream, with one humorously pouring one of the skeletons a drink from a gourd. In flipping the case from side to side, one gains the sense of a permeable boundary between this world and the next.

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Okioka Eizō and Asahi Gyokuzan
Active Meiji period; 1843–1923

The Monk Ikkyū
circa 1892–1893

Wood
Field Museum, World’s Columbian Exposition—Imperial
Japanese Commission (Gift), 72

Previously titled The Monk Ikkyū—a Japanese Great
Thinker—this piece was one of several Japanese wooden
sculptures exhibited at the World’s Columbian Exposition
in Chicago in 1893. It is likely to have been donated to the
anthropological collection of the newly founded Field
Museum of Natural History that same year.

The realism of the face demonstrates the artist’s
meticulous technique. Expressing a grave mood, the
sculpture was not created to be flamboyant. It was made
from a single piece of wood, and the fabric folds and other
ornamental embellishments are carefully rendered.

This figure originally held an ivory skull that had been
carved by the famous Asahi Gyokusan. The association of
the skull and the figure would have evoked the Buddhist
teachings of emptiness and impermanence expressed in the Ikkyū Gaikotsu, a compilation of poems attributed to Ikkyū Sōjun (1394–1481), a Zen monk and poet.

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Ōshima Joun
1858–1940

Seated Kirin
circa 1910–1930

Bronze
Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Approved gift from Kristin Zethren, TR.17434.13

The kirin is a mythical flying creature with the tail of an ox, hooves of a horse, scales of a carp, and antlers of a deer. Though made of a heavy bronze alloy, the seated kirin’s body appears light and flexible. Rather than covering the entire surface with fur, Joun merely hints at it through sparsely distributed, subtle curves. The mane and tail fur seem to be blowing in a headwind; such attention to detail dates this artwork to the Meiji period, when even mythical beings were infused with greater realism.

—Minori Egashira, PhD Candidate ‘25, Art History
Shibata Zeshin
1807–1891

A Hawk Glaring at Its Reflection in a Waterfall
1881

Pair of hanging scrolls; ink and color on silk
San Antonio Museum of Art, on loan from The Catherine and Thomas Edson Collection, L.2006.16.4.a–b

In the left-hand scroll, a hawk perched on a rock, stares vigilantly toward the right. The pendant scroll shows the object of the bird’s gaze: its own reflection in the glassy surface of a tall waterfall. This clever conceit delighted Louis Gonse, who wrote the first history of Japanese art in 1883. This is one of several paintings and lacquered pictures by Zeshin that muse on the medium of painting; the colorless vertical surface of the hanging scroll is equivalent to a waterfall. That waterfall is acting like another painting, reflecting the hawk, and with it, Zeshin’s skill.

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Takeuchi Seihō
1864–1942

Dead Crane
Late Meiji period

Hanging scroll; ink and color on silk
Collection of Robert S. and Betsy G. Feinberg

Cranes have been an East Asian symbol of longevity since ancient times. A life-sized painting of a dead crane is therefore both rare and impressive. Why, one might ask, would the artist have applied his extraordinary skills of realistic depiction to such a theme?

In Japan, cranes have been hunted and eaten since prehistoric times; in the Edo period, they were hunted and sent as rare gifts among the elite. It is likely that Seihō depicted a crane hunted as game for a special occasion. The Meiji government conferred protected status on all species of cranes beginning in 1893, meaning they were no longer legally available for consumption. This painting is signed “After Antiquity—Seihō” (Moko Seihō), suggesting that it is a copy of an earlier work.

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Tsukioka Yoshitoshi
1839–1892

A Brief History of Japan: Susanoō no Mikoto Kills the Eight-Headed Serpent at Hirokawa in Izumo Province
1887

Polychrome woodblock print (nishiki-e) triptych
Collection of Richard and Linda Greene

This rare triptych shows a handscroll of Japanese history unfurled to reveal the dramatic scene of the Shinto deity Susanoō slaying the eight-headed serpent at Izumo. Susanoō is portrayed with Yoshitoshi’s signature elongated body proportions. His long hair and voluminous garments flutter in the wind as he confronts the fearsome serpent. At the upper left, Princess Kushinada awaits her rescue from the beast, who had already consumed her seven sisters. Susanoō ordered the preparation of eight vats of sake for the serpent, slaying it after it became intoxicated. He then took possession of a divine sword found inside one of its tails and received Kushinada’s hand in marriage.
This presentation of the legend of Susanoō and the serpent as a chapter of Japanese history allowed viewers to draw a line from these storied valiant deeds of the seas into their own era of seafaring adventures.

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Tsukioka Yoshitoshi
1839–1892

New Selection of Six Monsters: Taira Kiyomori
Seeing Skulls in the Snowy Garden
1882

Polychrome woodblock print (nishiki-e) triptych
Tirey-van Lohuizen Collection, Houston

In this woodblock print triptych, Tsukioka Yoshitoshi illustrates how Taira no Kiyomori’s rise to power haunted him in his private realms. This tale of a historic warrior reflects a distinctly Meiji approach to the Heian past. The first panel depicts nine haunting human skulls rising from the water. Shades of gray create an unsettling sense of realism amongst the skulls while simultaneously camouflaging them into the landscape as ordinary garden rocks. The skulls remain still while Kiyomori springs to his feet with an intense gaze toward his inner demons. Courtly ladies in lavish kimo-no cower underneath him. Though he is a mythic warlord, the fear of death looms in the air.

—Kina Takahashi, The College ’24, Art History and English Language/Literature
Unidentified artist

Gold Lacquer Shodana Tea Cabinet, Decorated with the Twenty-Four Paragons of Filial Piety

circa 1880

Kinji gold lacquer with silver mounts embellished with gold, inlaid ivory, and mother-of-pearl
Private Collection, New York City

This shodana, or cabinet with shelves, is covered on every surface, even the interiors of the doors, with lavish decoration that includes black and gold lacquer, carved ivory inlay, and insets of abalone shell, as well as ornate metal fittings throughout. This combination of complex techniques and refined materials was typical of the finest Meiji-period shodana, some of which were presented as gifts to royalty in Europe.

The decorative scheme that runs throughout the cabinet is based on a traditional Chinese text from the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368), The Twenty-Four Paragons of Filial Piety (Èrshí sì xià o), a collection of stories that emphasize Confucian devotion to one’s parents. The text was popular in Japan and the parables were often recounted to reinforce social order. As an artistic theme in Japan, the
Paragons are typically represented in the style of Ming-dynasty painting, as is the case here, where various episodes from the text are featured in vignettes on the doors, nestled in between landscapes, decorative Tokugawa kamon (crests), floral scenes, and dragons, some of which swirl around and climb up the cabinet’s supports.

In addition to being popular exports, similar cabinets also adorned the tatami mat rooms of aristocratic Japanese women. They held vases, curios, or tea implements such as those on view nearby in this gallery.

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Yasuda Rōzan  
1830–1883

Moonlit Landscape with Scholar and Servant  
Latter half of the 19th century

Hanging scroll; ink on silk  
Indianapolis Museum of Art at Newfields, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Robert J. Shula, 81.233

For centuries Japanese painters produced works in a literati mode conversant with Chinese paintings and woodblock-print illustrations that had found their way to Japan. Yet until the 1860s very few Japanese painters had the opportunity to travel to China to study painting there. Hailing from current-day Gifu prefecture, Rōzan first traveled to Nagasaki to study literati painting, but then took the daring step of stowing away on a ship bound for Shanghai. Within three years of returning to Japan in 1873, he was being listed as one of the best artists of his day. It was later recalled that his “bold and candid style fit the spirit of the Meiji Restoration, whose rationale had been formed through the study of Chinese texts.”
In Moonlit Landscape, Rōzan boldly applied criss-crossing lines and moss dots to the peaks and cliff faces, evoking their three-dimensionality, texture, and spiritual energy.

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Yasuda Rōzan
1830–1883

Pine and Flowers
1882

Hanging scroll; ink on paper
The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Michael R. Cunningham in honor of Fr. Harrie A. Vanderstappen S.V.D., 2015.106

In this hanging scroll, robust brushstrokes deftly outline sturdy pine branches and coiled stones, harmoniously juxtaposed with vibrant peonies. From the dynamic brushstrokes to the elegant cursive inscription, Rōzan eloquently showcases his mastery of literati painting. Having recognized China as the hub of literati art, he ventured to Shanghai in 1867, a year before the lifting of travel restrictions between Japan and China. During his seven-year stay until 1873, Rōzan learned from the Shanghai painter Hu Gongshou (1823–1886). The theme is complemented by lines of verse, likely penned by the artist, which expressed the loftiness of the literati identity:
I harbor no envy for the enchanting beauty of the freshly bloomed peonies; The simple elegance (of another kind) harmonized with the verdant pine trees. May the dewdrops on ever-young branches, tinted by rouge, reign over spring for an enduring time.

In the spring of 1882, made at the Thatched Hall of Water and Stone. Rōzan An Yo.
不妬牡丹妖豔新，清妍好与翠松邻，
和將不老枝頭
露，染得胭脂長占春。壬午之春造於水石草堂。
老山安養。

—Bohan Li, PhD Student, Art History
Noguchi Shōhin
1847–1916

Front: The Gathering at the Orchid Pavilion
Back: Geese among Reeds
1890

Pair of six-panel screens; recto, ink, colors, and gold on silk; verso, ink and silver on paper

This pair of double-sided screens illustrates Shōhin’s mastery of Chinese-style ink painting in two different styles. The front presents Chinese landscapes in a blue-green style redolent of the distant past. Their protagonist in the Orchid Pavilion is Wang Xizhi (303–361), the most famous calligrapher in history, who was joined by other scholars there in the spring of 353 CE. This theme, recurrent in Chinese paintings, conveys the vitality of spring with figures in brightly colored robes engaging in lively exchanges. While Shōhin’s blue-green landscape evokes the Chinese past, its meticulous construction of an expansive, three-dimensional landscape underscores the link between illusionistic Qing court painting and Meiji realism.
In contrast, the back side of the screen pair employs only ink to loosely portray reeds and geese on a silver background, and the calligraphic brushstrokes evoke the subdued and tranquil late autumn. Interestingly, the goose was Wang Xizhi’s favorite animal: in addition to inspiring calligraphic practice through its graceful movements, it also figured in Daoist alchemical practices. While the front presents a lively scene, the reverse side might represent Wang Xizhi’s spiritual world.

Shōhin specialized in Chinese literati painting. She was also the first female painter to become an Imperial Household Artist in 1904.

—Yuzhe Cao, MAPH ’24, Art History
Unidentified artist

Children and Lion Dancer
1868–1912

Ivory

This small ivory okimono or statuette could easily be handled and turned in one’s hands. Carved in intricate detail on every surface, it is meant to be appreciated from multiple angles. Three children perform the shishi-mai (lion dance), a traditional dance performed during the New Year to dispel evil and bring good fortune. The mask at the object’s base is an otafuku mask, which symbolizes good luck and happiness. Grouped with the drum, which drives off evil, this piece celebrates and protects its owner. Skilled Meiji-period craftsmanship is apparent in the piece. Shallow etchings are used to decorate the garment and hair, while deeper grooves describe curls and the three-dimensionality of the lion costume. Okimono like this piece were desirable commodities during this time due to their high craftsmanship.

—Minori Egashira, PhD Candidate ’25, Art History
Scan the QR code or follow the URL to view a 3D model of this object on your mobile device

https://smartmuseum.uchicago.edu/meiji-3d.

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Dōitsu

Marishiten

1890

Carved ivory sculpture
Private Collection, New York City

This Esoteric Buddhist deity of wealth and prosperity is often seen with a boar and sun or moon in hand. The ivory from which it was made was popular in the Meiji period to create smaller sculptures, both for its luxury and carving texture. The artist’s skill shines through in the detailed chiseling of the deity’s hair, the patterns on the garments, the fur of the boar, and the woodgrains etched into the base of the artwork. It shows Dōitsu’s dedication to detail and the audience’s preference for precision.

Various portable sculptures like this artwork were exported from Japan due to their popularity overseas. While it is unclear to whom the Marishiten was originally dedicated, its religious nature may suggest an intended domestic audience.

—Minori Egashira, PhD Candidate ’25, Art History

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Kano Hōgai
1828–1888

Two Dragons in Clouds
1885

Ink on paper, framed
Philadelphia Museum of Art, Gift of Mrs. Moncure Biddle in memory of her father, Ernest F. Fenollosa, 1940-41-1

Hōgai, who had previously worked for the shogunal government as a member of its most favored painting atelier, met the American professor Ernest Fenellosa (1853–1908) in the early 1880s. He produced Two Dragons under the auspices of Fenellosa, who valued what he saw as the “aesthetic idealism” embodied in Japanese painting, namely, its perceived attention to formal elements like line and shading. Hōgai’s use of foreshortening and chiaroscuro suggests close technical study of Western painting, but his attention to the medium of ink and water in all its potentials—from the obsessive linearity of the dragons’ scales to the murky, primordial ether surrounding the creatures—also situates this work within a long lineage of East Asian ink painting.

—Taylor Chisato Stewart, PhD Student, Art History
Kawanabe Kyōsai  
1831–1889

Hell Courtesan  
1885–1889

Hanging scroll; ink and color on silk  
Weston Family Foundation

Tales describe the Hell Courtesan’s conversation with the medieval Zen monk Ikkyū who, notwithstanding his monastic vows, visited brothels, drank sake, and went dancing. Ikkyū and the Hell Courtesan had a profound discussion about sin and salvation. When the Hell Courtesan temporarily left the room, she noticed that the figures dancing with Ikkyū all appeared as skeletons silhouetted against the sliding doors.

In Kyōsai’s rendition of this tale, the wizened figure of Ikkyū appears at upper left, absorbed in dancing while a skeleton plays the shamisen and fourteen tiny skeletons dance exuberantly. The skeleton motif became especially prominent in the Meiji era, when the study of anatomy—both in art and medicine—became widespread. Kyōsai adds delicate ink-wash shading to the faces and bodies of
the skeletons and masterfully shows each in a different lively pose.
Miyabe Atsuyoshi
1870–1911

Incense Burner
circa 1890

Bronze with gold and silver inlays and shibuichi and shakudō patinated metals
Ackland Art Museum, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, The William A. Whitaker Foundation Art Fund, 2017.32ab

This intricate incense burner takes the form of a container playfully held aloft by an oni, a small, impish demon. The demon might also represent the Wind God Fūjin holding his bag of wind. Nesting swallows, symbols of domestic bliss, crown the top of the vessel, which is made to resemble a bamboo basket that is breaking apart from the rising winds. On the censer’s side, symbols such as monkeys, egrets, and lotus evoke success and fortune.

The different hues on this vessel result from Miyabe’s masterful control over complex processes such as irogane patination and elaborate raised inlays called takazōgan. The swallows are covered in a rich patina of shakudō (an alloy of gold and copper and resembling black lacquer).
Shibata Zeshin
1807–1891

Wastewater Bowl
circa 1880

Lacquer
Private Collection

Zeshin frequently sought to use lacquer—derived from the poison sap of the lacquer tree—to imitate other materials. For this wastewater bowl he deftly imitated sahari, an alloy of copper, tin, and lead, that is often used for Buddhist ritual items. The sahari-nuri (sahari finish) was created with a mixture of different metal powders combined with lacquer. Despite its appearance as a cast metal object, the bowl is feather-light, an effect that is enhanced by its structure, which lacks a wooden core. Instead, the artist has applied layers of lacquer to a paper substrate, resulting in a very thin and light object. As a result, Zeshin effectively tricks the viewer and, even more effectively, the handler.
Ogata Gekkō
1831–1889

Gods Izanami and Izanagi Standing on the Floating Bridge of Heaven
1896

Polychrome woodblock print (nishiki-e)
Collection of Dr. Vincent Covello

These kami, or deities, appear at the beginning of Japan’s oldest histories, the Kojiki (Record of Ancient Matters) and Nihon shoki (Chronicles of Japan, 720). The Meiji government encouraged artists to use the deities as subject matter as part of the effort to inculcate a sense of national belonging. Although worshipped at Shintō shrines since ancient times, they were only rarely illustrated in the Edo period and were not always envisioned in human form. Ogata Gekkō imbued the creator deities Izanami and Izanagi with a fresh sense of realism through body proportions that broke with past ukiyo-e; thin, energetic lines that provide volume to the garments; and a sense of informality and intimacy as both their gazes are trained on the bird. This print depicts the very moment when the two deities created the islands of Japan.

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Kobayashi Kiyochika
1847–1915

Our Field Artillery Attacks the Enemy Camp at Jiuliancheng
1896

Polychrome woodblock print (nishiki-e)
Collection of Dr. Vincent Covello

The First Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895), fought between Qing China and Meiji Japan’s new modern military, revived demand for the traditional color woodblock prints (nishiki-e) amidst competition from imported printing technologies like lithography and engraving. This print places viewers alongside Meiji forces in this solemn, rainy scene. Hooded soldiers crowd around and operate a cannon, the presumable source of the bright, explosive burst over Jiuliancheng, a walled city across the river border between China and Korea. A mounted general sits above them, sword at the ready, with his gaze fixed on the Chinese city subject to their attack.

Kobayashi Kiyochika was a highly productive leader in addressing the demand for war prints, creating imaginatively sentimental prints that rallied popular
support for the war at a peak publishing rate of three per week. Produced by carvers and printers under the publisher Inoue Kichijirō, this print uses experimental techniques not seen in traditional woodblock prints. The rain, as it blows across the figures, is rendered through a subtractive method instead of through the addition of a black “rain block.” The suppression of black outlines conveys the low visibility of the rainy night.

—Zakaria Sadak, The College ’25, Art History and East Asian Languages and Civilizations
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Mishima Shōsō
1856–1928

The Qing Army’s Foolish Plan of Using Tigers as Weapons
1895

Polychrome woodblock print (nishiki-e)
Tirey–van Lohuizen Collection, Houston

The Qing and Japanese War, or First Sino-Japanese War, of 1894–1895 is known as modern Japan’s first foreign war. It was fought against Qing China over control of Korea, then a vassal of the Qing Empire, and it resulted in the ceding of Taiwan to Japanese control. In addition to deploying Euro-American-style battle tactics and weaponry, Japan also embedded 114 journalists, four photographers, and eleven visual artists across nineteen different units of the military.

That said, many of the popular portrayals of the war were fictitious. They were commercial products to discredit the enemy and amuse buyers. The Qing army never weaponized tigers. Even from a zoological standpoint, this scene would be preposterous: tigers do not hunt in packs. On a stylistic level, Shōsō’s print produces an illusion of
realism through its rendering of the tigers, which is based on life-sketching.

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Tsuji Kakō
1870–1931

Kannon

circa 1895

Hanging scroll; ink and color on paper
Private Collection

Infinitely compassionate and committed to saving devotees from any predicament, Avalokitesvara (Kannon in Japanese) was the most popular bodhisattva in early modern Japan and China. While gendered as male by sacred texts, Avalokitesvara’s appearance was feminized over time in East Asia and frequently worshipped in China as “Avalokitesvara, the bringer of sons” (Songzi Guanyin). In the Meiji period, when Christianity was reintroduced to Japan after a ban of over two hundred fifty years, the Kannon and child motif gained popularity, as it seemed to emphasize similarities between Christianity and Buddhism. Despite these new resonances, Tsuji Kakō’s painting is a thoroughly Buddhist painting, accurately transmitting Chinese iconography that first became popular in eighteenth-century Kyoto, the city of his birth. It shows the child Sudhana (Zenzai dōji) revering the bodhisattva on the sacred isle of Potalaka.
Tsukioka Yoshitoshi
1839–1892

Fujiwara Yasumasa Playing the Flute by Moonlight
1883

Polychrome woodblock print (nishiki-e)
Collection of Dr. Vincent Covello

This is one of Yoshitoshi’s most famous compositions and was based on a hanging scroll painting which the artist submitted to the First Domestic Competitive Exhibition of Painting in 1882. It depicts the Heian courtier Fujiwara Yasumasa (958–1056) on his way home on an autumn night. A bandit who had been intending to rob Yasumasa of his fine robes became so enchanted by the courtier’s flute playing that he followed him home without committing the act. According to the tale, arriving home and becoming aware of his presence, Yasumasa compassionately gave the bandit a robe. This print shows how Yoshitoshi transformed his 1868 triptych of the same subject by simplifying the background, altering the poses of the figures, and heightening the suspense: we can almost hear the piercing sound of the flute mingled with the autumn wind in the pampas grass.
Shibata Zeshin
1807–1891

Set of Stacked Boxes (Jūbako) with Willow and Waterwheel
circa 1860–1890

Lacquer over wood with gold maki-e, kanshitsu, dull silver, rust brown, polished black details, and mother-of-pearl and karigaki highlights
San Antonio Museum of Art, on loan from The Catherine and Thomas Edson Collection, L.2006.16.46

Zeshin was a groundbreaking lacquer artist who experimented with the medium to expand its repertoire of colors and decorative capacity. Often his experimentation was in service of the revival of an older, lost technique, as was the case with seigaiha-nuri, or combed lacquer, which is here cleverly used to imply waves of water. This technique, which the artist used frequently, took six years to perfect and involves the thickening of the lacquer with the addition of egg whites or clays, so that when the wet lacquer is combed, the surface retains its grooves even after it has dried.
The design of this box presents flowers and plants from all four seasons, with subtle gold highlighting specific portions, such as the willow’s bark. These desiccated golden plants are placed against a greenish-brown ground that resembles bronze, a lacquer technique known as seidō-nuri, another Zeshin invention.

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Koransha Studio of Arita
1847–1915

Monumental Blue-and-White Porcelain by Koransha Depicting Byōdō-in

circa 1900

Underglaze cobalt blue decoration on white kaolin porcelain, with molded and applied elements and fuki-e (spray) application of pigment

Private Collection, New York City

Still in operation today as the Fukunaga Company, Koransha was known for their cobalt blue-and-white porcelains. This monumental work celebrates the Byōdō-in Temple near Kyoto, which was built during the Heian period and contains the famous Phoenix Hall (Amida-dō), which underwent extensive renovations during the Meiji period. As if to further emphasize the Phoenix Hall’s importance, the vase has been adorned with raised decorations of long-tailed phoenixes.

While in the 1890s Koransha acquired machinery to streamline ceramic production, it was never successfully implemented. Still, this jar reflects technological innovation in its use of fuki-e, an application technique in which
pigment is carefully blown through a cloth pulled tightly over the end of a bamboo tube. While a historic technique, during the Meiji Period artists used it to simulate the soft atmospheric effects of painting, which can be seen here, especially in the scene of pigeons on the back of the jar, which were likely inspired by the contemporary nihonga (Japanese-style) paintings of Watanabe Seitei (1851–1918).
Utagawa (Baidō) Kokunimasa
1874–1944

Hell Courtesan
circa 1900

Pair of six-panel screens; ink, color, gold pigment and silver leaf on paper
Private Collection

In this witty rendition of the Hell Courtesan theme, the courtesan, beneath a decaying parasol, leads a terrifying, yet somehow alluring, procession on the screen at left. She is accompanied by attendants as well as kamuro, young courtesans in training, whose jewelry and silk robes have been replaced by flowers and banana leaves. On the screen at right, a group of skeletal townspeople observe the procession. Among the observers, one skeleton appears as if seated in Zen meditation with a blue-and-white towel on his head. This cloth, decorated with a fly whisk and karma mirror motif, indicates he represents the monk Ikkyū, the Hell Courtesan’s traditional companion.

To further emphasize the transience of human life, the artist placed his signature and seal on an overturned grave marker, visible at the far right of the right screen.
Comically flipped on its side, Kokunimasa’s tombstone now serves as an armrest for a skeleton who is getting acupuncture.
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Makuzu Kōzan I (Miyagawa Toranosuke)
1842–1916

Kannon and Child
1886

Porcelain
The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, Museum purchase with funds provided by the W. Alton Jones Foundation Acquisition Fund, 49.2793

This free-standing porcelain represents Kōzan’s take on seventeenth- to nineteenth-century white porcelain and ivory Chinese figures of songzi Guanyin (Avalokitesvara, the bringer of sons). Both forms were venerated by women hoping to become pregnant. During the Edo period, with the shogunate’s prohibition of Christianity, clandestine images of the Christian Virgin and Child were disguised as a Kannon and child, and to us offer another visual precedent for this figure. The elegantly curving form of the bodhisattva evokes earlier ivory statuettes that made use of the natural curvature of the tusk. Distinctly Meiji, however, is the intense realism of the Kannon, whose eyes are gently downcast under the veil, and the active child, who looks out inquisitively at the viewer.
Kōzan experimented with Chinese-style glazes, emulating various glazing techniques from the Qing dynasty and earlier, such as blanc-de-Chine or Dehua porcelain, as he did with this figure.
Fukada Chokujō
1861–1947

Ghostly Couple
1901

Pair of hanging scrolls with mounting painted by artist; ink and color on silk
John C. Weber Collection

This pair of hanging scrolls depicts an emaciated man—himself possibly a spirit—haunted by a female ghost: the worn and wistful face of the man suggests that they are lovers pining to see each other. The ghostly scene is rendered entirely in ink across two hanging scrolls, accentuating their separation, while the willow on the folding screen is a symbol of the divide between the living and the dead. In contrast to the spectral couple, Fukada has painted the scrolls’ mounts with a range of brightly colored boys’ and girls’ toys, some traditional, such as a flute and a tiger with a bobbing head, and some new, such as a mounted soldier and a train. In this distinction between the monochrome painting and its colorful mount, we feel the tension between the people who long for each other and the objects that remain behind even after they grow up or pass away.

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Cultivating a Modern Aesthetic

The notion of Japanese artists’ affinity with nature developed as early as the 1860s and was especially prominent in Europe in the 1880s and 1890s. Scholars have pointed to the racial prejudice that underlay this narrative, as it presented the artists as simple and childlike, bearing a carefree, unmediated relationship with the natural world. Natural motifs supported Euro-American impressions of Japanese art as decorative, suited more to adorning surfaces than to expressing lofty concepts. Progressive artists who sought freedom from the grand narratives of Salon paintings embraced Japanese artists’ attention to small creatures, such as birds, insects, and marine life.

Japanese makers noted the success of natural subjects among foreign buyers of Japanese art, and indeed such subjects had long been popular within Japan, where they bore poetic resonances and reflected the passing of the seasons. In the Meiji period, a further layer was added to these works as the Japanese were quick to accept Darwin’s theories of evolution and related notions of social Darwinism. Equipped with tools of observation-based realism from both East Asian and European artistic traditions, artists revisited and expanded on the traditional theme of animal predation paintings.
Numerous painters worked as textile designers in the Meiji period, ushering in an era of experimentation with color, form, and style. The Art Nouveau movement borrowed motifs and design principles from art around the world and bore a particularly close relationship to Japanese art. Japanese makers’ confident application of the Art Nouveau visual language meant that the globalization of Japanese art had come full circle.
Below:

Miyagawa Shuntei and Akiyama Buemon
1873–1914; active 1868–1900

Elephant in Ueno Zoo
1897

Polychrome woodblock print (nishiki-e)
Mead Art Museum, Amherst College, Gift of William Green, AC 2004.189

The series Kodomo fūzoku (Children’s Customs) to which this print belongs was published in 1896 and 1897, seemingly in great quantity. Many of the designs serve as visual documentation of the lives and habits of upper-class children during the Meiji period, especially their various fashions. In this design, some of the boys wear pants, boots, or ball caps. One boy, who is only seen from the back, is dressed like an officer in the Imperial Navy in black shorts and a shirt, complete with white piping and a black seaman’s cap. It was common practice during the Meiji period to dress little boys as tiny soldiers, a sign of Japan’s growing militarism.
Another modern distinction is, of course, the print’s setting. Opened in 1882, the Ueno Zoo was the first of its kind in Asia to be considered modern. Analogously, Shuntei’s rendering of the elephant is a striking departure from earlier, highly stylized depictions of the animal. The subtle gradation of the elephant’s feet and its forlorn expression give this image a poignant sense of realism.

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Kinkōzan Studio

Sake Ewer
Late 19th century

Clear-glazed earthenware with painted, enamel, and gold decoration
Private Collection, New York

The Kinkōzan Studio in Awata, Kyoto, was a leading producer of finely detailed works like this, an extraordinary example of Kyō Satsuma, or Satsuma ware, produced in Kyoto. The studio’s artists often borrowed imagery from contemporary paintings and even photographs, reproducing them with striking accuracy and detail. A proliferation of decorative borders and tiny dots of gold, especially in the skies of their landscape imagery, is also characteristic of their designs.

Superimposed over the geometric enamel design that runs around the entirety of this sake ewer are four paintings, all of which appear to have summertime themes. The landscapes appear to be taken from the bunjinga, or literati, school of Japanese painting (also known as nanga, literally “Southern-school painting”), which was heavily influenced by Chinese tradition, while the wisteria and
chicken works are more typical of the Rinpa School. Each painting bears the red seal of Sōzan, who was the most talented of Kinkōzan’s painters. The seal also indicates that Sōzan was most likely responsible for both the design and the actual painting of this piece.
Kawade Shibatarō
1856–1921

Vase with Design of Peacock Feathers
circa 1900

Cloisonné enamel with silver mounts and wires
Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Gift from the
Japanese Cloisonné Enamels Collection of Donald K.
Gerber and Sueann E. Sherry, M.2010.197.3

Kawade made use of many techniques in his repertoire, such as the gintai (silver wire) seen on the peacock design and the wireless (musen) enameling, with its blended colors. When compared with his other works, this piece, conversant in international Art Nouveau, also testifies to Kawade’s broad stylistic range.
Nakagawa Hachirō
1877–1922

Cherry Blossom Festival
circa 1903

Watercolor on off-white paper
Indianapolis Museum of Art at Newfields, John Herron Fund, 04.2

During the cherry blossom season in Japan, people gather under cherry trees for hanami, or flower viewing, where they picnic, sing, and dance. This painting captures the snow-like falling of cherry blossom petals with light brushstrokes of petals on the ground. Unlike Japanese-style paintings, the contrast of a darker foreground and lighter background creates a depth a field. This technique was achieved through watercolors, a Western-style painting technique that was experimental in the Meiji period. Nakagawa depicts an interconnectedness of cultures by painting Japanese-rooted content with Western mediums.

In 1903 and 1904, Nakagawa toured the U.S., studying art and selling watercolors to museums in Boston, Detroit, Toledo, and Indianapolis. On this trip, Nakagawa sold this
painting to the John Herron Art Institute, which later became the Indianapolis Museum of Art at Newfields.

—Kay Kim, MAPH ’25, Cinema and Media Studies

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Shibata Zeshin
1807–1891

Bowl for Tea Sweets

circa 1880s

Turned cryptomeria wood with lacquer decoration
The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago, Gift of Brooks McCormick Jr., 2002.9

Throughout his productive career, Zeshin produced many vessels for the enjoyment of tea, ranging in purpose from the storage of leaves to, in this case, serving sweets during tea gatherings. The simple design of this bowl foregrounds the materiality of the cedarwood, whose surface is interrupted only by three decorative poem cards rendered in lacquer and sprinkled metal powder. While elements of literati culture were rejected by certain sects of the Meiji cultural establishment, Zeshin himself wrote haiku and, as a painter trained in the Maruyama-Shijō tradition, would have been exposed to mid-Edo literati knowledge. The bowl might also pay homage to the work of the polymath Hon’ami Kōetsu (1558–1637), known for his calligraphy and his bold, minimalistic lacquer designs.
Shibata Zeshin
1807–1891

Flower Arrangement and a Butterfly
1870–1880

Hanging scroll; lacquer on paper
Weston Collection

Several of Zeshin’s inventions within the lacquer medium can be attributed to his deft draftsmanship, especially urushi-e, or lacquer painting. This urushi-e hanging scroll flaunts Zeshin’s precise linework and his use of shasei, or realistic observation, a principle of the painting school with which he trained in the Edo period. But implicit in the picture is the technical finesse required to create such a work in the first place. In addition to various natural subjects, cast metal objects like water pitchers, teapots, and trays frequently feature in his pictorial works. Considering that he would often use pigmented lacquer to mimic the surface of aged, cast metal in his three-dimensional trompe l’oeil vessels, this choice of subject can be read as a meditation on the unstable boundary between painting and craft.

—Taylor Chisato Stewart, PhD Student, Art History

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Watanabe Seitei
1851–1918

Crow
1904

Hanging scroll; ink on paper
Darrel C. Karl Collection

Since medieval times, poets saw themselves in the figure of the lone crow surveying the world with its keen eye and brusque voice. This painting of a crow on an early spring willow at dawn resembles a woodblock print that Seitei designed for the journal Bijutsu sekai (Fine Arts World) in 1894 and another, undated square print signed Seikō (dates unknown). In both painting and print, Seitei rendered the crow’s glossy black feathers by modulating the application of black ink, eschewing black outlines in the pursuit of greater realism. The theme of the crow was treated by several other artists of the period, including Kawanabe Kyōsai (1831–1889) and Takeuchi Seihō (1864–1942) (see the screens at the far end of this gallery).
Unidentified artist

Tea Leaf Storage Jar with Trompe L’oeil
Brocade Mouth Cover Design

circa 1800–1850

Satsuma ware; earthenware with overglaze enamels and gold
Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Gift of Leslie Prince Salzman, M.2007.130a-b

Overglaze gold enamels recreate in careful detail a woven fabric cover, the likes of which was traditionally used to cover jars of this type. The decorative paulownia crests are known as the “5–7 Paulownia” (go-shichi giri) for the number of the flowers on the outer and inner floral sprays, respectively, and were codified as official governmental seals during the Meiji period shortly after this piece was made. This highlights the way in which the government used historic motifs from earlier periods to perform new, modern roles.

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Unidentified artist, Nishijin Studios
Active Meiji and Taishō periods

Woodland Grove
circa 1910

Embroidered silk floss; original lacquered wood frame with braided silk hinges
Private Collection, New York City

While no maker has yet been identified for this four-panel screen, its date of manufacture likely spans the late Meiji and early Taishō periods. Such large-scale embroideries required the work of many hands over the course of many months, if not years, to complete. The imagery, here rendered in hundreds of thousands of tiny stitches in numerous colors of silk floss, resembles a European landscape painting from the eighteenth or nineteenth century; however, the contrasting coloration seen most clearly in the bark and leaves of the trees in the foreground, as well as the somewhat shadowy background, where the outlines of feathery trees are only vaguely suggested, also suggest a photographic or printed image as another possible source. Though very few of these complicated and labor-intensive screens survive today, many were made for export in the Meiji period.

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Andō Jūbei
1851–1918

Vase with Bamboo Design
circa 1910

Partial plique-à-jour cloisonné enamels with pure silver (jungin) mounts
Collection of Susan Tosk

Despite the apparent simplicity of its decoration, this vase represents a culmination of many of the innovations and experimentations of Andō Jūbei and his chief designer Kawade Shibatarō. The careful use of totai shippō, or partial plique-à-jour, to highlight select bamboo leaves, is the embodiment of bijutsu kōgei (artistic craft or fine art craft), a Meiji-period neologism that elevated decorative art to the status of sculpture and painting. Indeed, the translucent leaves, which gleam only when the vessel is empty, indicate that this vase was not meant to hold flowers but was instead to be admired for its effects of color, light, and masterful techniques.

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Hattori Tadasaburō
d. 1939

Vase with Raised Bok Choy Design
circa 1905

Cloisonné enamel with pure silver (jungin) mounts
Collection of Susan Tosk

Along with Kawade, Hattori is considered to be one of the inventors of moriage cloisonné, which is often translated as “sculpted” or “raised” enameling, a laborious and complicated technique that can be seen in this example. To achieve the impressive moriage effect, the enameled surface is built up over several firings, typically supported by hidden cloisons. The surface is then repeatedly and carefully polished and shaped, yielding the three-dimensional effect seen here. Hattori’s designs also boast an added layer of masterful complexity with his carefully nuanced use of blended coloring, characteristic of his oeuvre. While the sculpted relief of the bok choy vase may appear simple, its undulating rim, which replicates the outlines of the plant’s leaves, required great skill to clad.

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Hattori Tadasaburō
d. 1939

Vase with Raised Edamame Design
circa 1910

Cloisonné enamel vase with silver and gold wire
Private Collection, New York City

Hattori’s design shows a ubiquitous Japanese plant executed with novel and complicated techniques embodying the aesthetic principles of late Meiji design. Artists groups such as Kyōbikōkai (Kyoto bijutsu kōgei-kai, or the Kyoto Artistic Craft Association) founded by Kamisaka Sekka (1866–1942), sought to use traditional motifs in fresh, modern, and refined ways. At the same time, they maintained a subtle focus on the finest techniques of bijutsu kōgei, “artistic craft” or “fine art craft,” a Meiji-period neologism that elevated decorative art to the status of sculpture and painting.

Hattori was known at times to take on the name Kōrin, an overt reference to the Rinpa painter Ogata Kōrin (1658–1716). Using natural, even humble, botanical motifs like these in a highly decorative and skillful manner, Hattori, like a true master of Rinpa, was able to transcend the
simple content of his designs, creating objects of seductive and sophisticated modern form.
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Itaya Hazan
1872–1963

Vase with Low-Relief Decoration of Bamboo Leaves
1915

Pigmented porcelain body with celadon green and lapis lazuli
The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, Acquired by Henry Walters, 49.2281

Itaya is credited with transforming the Japanese ceramic tradition, incorporating modern elements of Art Nouveau and Japonisme into his work, which exhibit carefully carved designs and masterful use of underglaze applications of color. With this example, he carefully incised and carved layers of overlapping bamboo leaves, articulating even the striated veining and twisting stems in shallow yet distinct relief, partially colored green and set against a deep blue background. The many layers of leaves also reflect Itaya’s remarkable ability to create a sense of depth on the surface of this vessel, which is arguably the most important Japanese studio ceramic in the United States and the only known example of his work in an American public collection.
This vase was exhibited at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition of 1915 in San Francisco, where it was purchased by the collector Henry Walters (1848–1931).
Morikawa Toen
1820–1894

Stag, Doe, and Fawn
1892

Polychromed wooden sculpture

A master of the “Nara-style one-sword carving” technique (Nara ittō bori), sculptor Morikawa Toen (1820–1894) created works with as few “impurities” as possible. The angular look of these sculptures is a consequence of using only a single blade, as well as signifying minimal handling of the wood.

The unpolished look of the sculpture pairs with the artist’s intention: they were made to be viewed in a spacious exhibition like the World’s Fair. From afar, the uneven surfaces of the deer appear furry, and the imperfect speckled patterning on their hides attracts the viewers’ attention. Up close, more details appear, such as the hyper-realistic antlers. The ability to imagine various environmental and viewing conditions made Toen an exceptionally popular sculptor in the Meiji period.
—Minori Egashira, PhD Candidate ’25, Art History
Namikawa Sōsuke
1847–1910

Vase with Spring Flowers
circa 1895

Cloisonné enamel vase with silver and gold wire
Ackland Art Museum, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Partial Gift of Susan Tosk in honor of Eugene Tosk, 2017.6

“Namikawa of Tokyo,” as Sōsuke was known, is often credited as a pioneer in the use of musen (wireless) enamels, a technique in which some or all metal cloisons are removed prior to the first firing of the vessel, allowing for the creation of painterly effects. The subtle gradient of the background, which fades from gray to blue, offsets the bright colors of the central floral band. Another detail, the use of gold and silver wires to delineate some of the flowers, adds to the luxury of the piece while also accentuating certain colors, especially the pink of the peonies. His treatment of the various branches is equally impressive, with their outlines appearing to have been brushed on in sumi ink and to be atmospherically receding into the vessel’s surface, imparting painterly depth to the design.

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Namikawa Sōsuke  
1847–1910

Cock and Hens in Snow  
1892

Pair of cloisonné enamel vases  
Collection of Susan Tosk

These vases employ the masterful musen (wireless) technique to produce a studied and exacting imitation of nihonga (Japanese-style) painting and are likely based on designs by Watanabe Seitei, whose Birds and Flowers of Twelve Months are on display in this gallery. By definition, cloisonné uses wire outlines to define and separate motifs in differently colored enamels. It is therefore remarkable that Sōsuke and several other Meiji artists decided to conceal or remove the wires in order to achieve painterly effects like those seen on the velvety snow or the shading in the rooster’s white plumage. The smooth gradation of the background from blue to gray is equally remarkable and difficult to achieve. This quest to achieve unprecedented effects in a given medium is one of the hallmarks of Meiji craft.

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Nishimura Goun
1877–1938

Tiger

circa 1900–1920

Hanging scroll; ink, color, and gold on silk Indianapolis Museum of Art at Newfields, Mr. and Mrs. Richard Crane Fund, 2000.25

A tiger drinks from a stream in this bold composition, which dominates the verticality of the hanging scroll format. Departing from his teachers’ more conventional treatment of the animals, which they studied in zoos, Nishimura exploits the energy and freedom of bleeding ink lines to render the tiger’s striped fur and adds a bewitching detail: finely ground mineral pigments for the glowing green eyes.

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Takeuchi Seihō
1864–1942

Crows and Heron
circa 1904

Pair of two-panel folding screens; ink and color on gold leaf
The Gitter-Yelen Collection, 1999.27

Considered one of the fathers of nihonga (Japanese-style) painting, Seihō deftly blends elements of Western painting with the Maruyama-Shijo School, here placing expressive birds alight atop gnarled branches that are cleverly rendered in a dripping style, creating a highly realistic impression of bark. A similar effect can be observed in the white heron, whose soft, fluffy feathers are created with minimal yet energetic brushwork. In contrast, the crows are composed of many individual strokes, with increased attention paid to the birds’ lively expressions that betray an almost human wit, a common trait in Seihō’s many crow paintings. Following his trip to Europe, where he observed and painted exotic animals, he returned to more traditional Japanese subject matter. Herons are often associated with the quiet of the moon and winter, while crows represent cleverness, perseverance, and survival,
which Seihō here emphasizes in the crow at the far right, who has discovered a tasty acorn in the otherwise bare landscape.
Yamaga Seika
1885–1981

Painting of a Cuckoo
1911

Pair of six-panel folding screens; ink and color on gold leaf
Collection of Anne and John Collins

Seika was a dyer and weaver from Kyoto who trained in painting under the master Kamisaka Sekka. This award-winning screen pair on gold leaf was exhibited at the fifth Bunten (Ministry of Education Exhibition) in 1911 and at the International Exhibition of Contemporary Art in Amsterdam in 1912.

The nearly invisible cuckoo (kankodori) is in the third panel from the left, seemingly looking down at the viewer, as if to enhance the sensation of craning our necks to look upward at the canopy of a very tall tree. The curving branches of the typically straight cedar trees, then, may be said to capture the perceptual experience of gazing upward and searching for the bird whose distinctive call has already alerted us to its presence. Traditionally, a silent cuckoo is also associated with good governance,
adding another possible interpretive layer to this impressive work.

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Unidentified artist

Polar Bear
circa 1900–1910

Embroidered silk
The Art Institute of Chicago, Gift of George B. Harris, 1918.4

Polar bears became icons as artic expeditions increased around the turn of the twentieth century. In 1902 Tokyo’s Ueno Zoo purchased its first two polar bears from the legendary wild animal dealer and trainer Carl Hagenbeck (1844–1913) of Germany, who exhibited them in circuses at the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago and the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition in Saint Louis. In the Meiji period fine art textiles made expressly for display became popular among foreign buyers. Several different late Meiji embroideries of a polar bear are known today, but each is in a different style, indicating that multiple workshops experimented with the theme. The gleaming, shaggy fur and grayscale tonalities of this piece suggest that the artist sought to emulate an engraving.

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Ogawa Shōmin
1847–1891

Lacquer Bottle with Insects and a Flowering Vine
19th century

Lacquer on wood with metal pourer Weston Collection
This slightly angular bottle in the shape of a gourd bears images of seven different insects—crickets, katydid, grasshopper, and praying mantis—which rest amidst its curling leaves and vines. The fluid depiction of the plants belies the precision and control demanded by the maki-e technique, in which metallic powders were carefully sprinkled and applied to wet lacquer. Insects were favorite poetic subjects in Japan since ancient times and were particularly associated with late summer and autumn.

Shōmin studied painting with Ikeda Koson (1801–1866), a disciple of the Edo painter Sakai Hōitsu (1761–1829). In 1890 he joined the faculty of the Tokyo School of Fine Arts as its first instructor in the arts of lacquer.
Watanabe Seitei  
1851–1918

Birds and Flowers of Twelve Months and Four Seasons: First Month, Chickens and Adonis

Birds and Flowers of Twelve Months and Four Seasons: Second Month, Weeping Cherry and Japanese Robin

Birds and Flowers of Twelve Months and Four Seasons: Third Month, Lark and Dandelion

Birds and Flowers of Twelve Months and Four Seasons: Fourth Month, Peony in Rain

Birds and Flowers of Twelve Months and Four Seasons: Fifth Month, Carp in Water

Birds and Flowers of Twelve Months and Four Seasons: Sixth Month, Aibika and Snail

1905

Six of twelve hanging scrolls; ink and color on silk
Seitei’s distinctive painting technique uses watery brushstrokes of ink and light color to capture a sense of movement and to produce atmospheric effects of sunlight, haze, snow, or rain. Seitei traveled to Paris for the Exposition Universelle of 1878, where he was presented with a gold medal and had the opportunity to exchange drawings with Edgar Dégas (1834–1917). After returning to Japan, he lived comfortably from private commissions, of which this magnificent set of hanging scrolls appears to have been an example. Each scroll combines keen compositional sense with brushwork that evokes movement and moisture. In the nearby vases Cock and Hens in Snow, Namikawa Sōsuke (1847–1910) developed the revolutionary hidden wire cloisonné technique to capture precisely these effects. The underdrawings for the vases were almost certainly produced by Seitei.

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Japanese Cloissoné Enamels

Imported from China, the art of cloisonné enameling flourished during the Meiji period. The pursuit of new colors, techniques, and materials brought an already complicated process to new creative heights.

Japanese enamellers produce their designs by bending thin wires and adhering them to a vase or other form, typically made of metal to form cloisons. Once fired, each cloison can be filled with a paste of vitreous colored enamels. To fill all the cloisons entirely requires several firings. Once full, the object’s rough surface is polished with a series of increasingly fine stones. During the Meiji period, artists also experimented with musen (wireless) designs in which cloisons were removed, allowing colors to mix and blend.
Yūzen Dying Process

The technique of yūzen was developed during the early Edo period in Kyoto. It involves the application of a rice paste extruded from a tube onto textiles. During the Meiji period, the complexity of this process was taken to new heights, often to replicate the effects of painting. To create colorfast areas, the dyes in the rice paste were mixed with newly imported dyes, which were more easily controlled and could be applied directly to fabric without causing the colors to run. With numerous applications of paste and repeated dye baths, designs of great complexity could be made on a single uncut textile. Once complete, the design was steamed, setting the color and melting off the excess resist and thickening pastes. Meiji innovations simplified the process and allowed for painterly effects that more closely mimicked the soft gradations of color seen in contemporaneous nihonga painting.
Meiji Metalwork

Meiji artists adopted the European technique of soft modeling in wax before casting their sculptures, which resulted in strikingly realistic and daring designs. They also created studies in clay, wax, or plaster of Paris, which allowed them greater range of experimentation than workshop methods transmitted from the past.

Meiji artists also made masterful use of irogane (colored metal) patination. On the Tide-Changing Jewel with Dragon in this gallery, the rich dark tones of the dragon were created through shakudō (patination resembling black lacquer), striking a brilliant contrast with the gleaming silver of the waves. These colors were achieved through the use of different metal alloys and a complicated process involving an acidic solution in which the metalworks were submerged and boiled, creating a chemical reaction that gives the work its rich colors and seductive luster.
Chinese Culture in Meiji Japan

The Meiji period is often portrayed as a time of Westernization. But Meiji leaders also studied the Confucian classics, wrote Chinese poetry, and appreciated Chinese-style ink landscapes such as those seen in this gallery. Throughout the nineteenth century, Japanese artists emulated the sophisticated expressions they found in Chinese paintings, calligraphy, and crafts such as embroidery, porcelain, and cloisonne: the notion that Japan needed to have a unique national style apart from China did not immediately present itself. In fact, the new treaties dramatically increased Sino-Japanese intellectual and cultural exchange. Japanese artists could travel to the continent for the first time in over two hundred years, while Chinese artists and intellectuals also made their way to Japan.

At the same time, European colonialism and the creation of Japan’s Western-style military steadily eroded the traditional Sinocentric political order, and in 1894–1895, Japan fought and won a war with the Qing Empire over the issue of political influence in Korea. The Japanese government’s ambition to master Euro-American learning and diplomacy amidst the assertion of a new, more aggressive position in Pacific geopolitics changed but did not necessarily erode the prominence of Chinese culture.
in Japan. Rather than a face-off between Japanese and Western elements, the culture of Meiji Japan can be seen as exploring and interweaving Japanese, Chinese, and European strains, as witnessed by the Gathering of the Orchid Pavilion screens and colossal Aoi Matsuri tapestry in this gallery.