Kabuki Actors
Masterpieces of Japanese Woodblock Prints
from the Collection of
The Art Institute of Chicago
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Kabuki theater and Ukiyo-e prints developed side by side during the Edo period (1603-1868). Both were designed to appeal to the newly prosperous urban merchant class in Edo (now modern-day Tokyo), Sakai, Osaka, and Kyoto.

The Tokugawa shogunate (feudal government) had stratified most of Japanese society into four classes: the samurai (warrior elite) at the highest level, followed by farmers, artisans, and merchants. By the eighteenth century, this theoretical ordering of society no longer corresponded to economic reality, as the merchant class had come to control a considerable proportion of the nation’s wealth. Denied access to political power, urban merchants spent their money lavishly on both culture and frivolity. This extravagant culture became a separate world in itself, and was dubbed *Ukiyo* – the “Floating World.” The word Ukiyo, which originally alluded to the Buddhist term for the transient “Sorrowful World,” aptly characterized this ever-changing world of fashion and entertainment.

Woodblock printing, which produced inexpensive and therefore disposable images, was ideal for the depiction of this fashionable and sensual city life. Many artists and publishing houses in the urban centers produced *Ukiyo-e* (“Pictures of the Floating World”) for a public whose tastes differed from, but were no less discriminating than, those of the aristocracy. Entertainment districts filled with brothels were licensed by the feudal government. These red-light districts, along with Kabuki theaters, Sumō wrestling rings, and restaurants, provided all manner of entertainment for the pleasure-seeking bourgeoisie.

Kabuki actors and the Ukiyo-e artists who portrayed them continually influenced one another. A memorable play, performance, actor, role, or pose inspired woodblock prints, which, in turn, established the use of certain gestures, costumes, hairstyles, and make-up for future Kabuki performances. They also influenced every aspect of contemporary fashion. The prints served as advertisements and souvenirs, and the actors – due in great part to these *Ukiyo-e* – enjoyed fame and popularity comparable only to that of today’s film and rock stars.

Of the three widely known forms of Japanese theater (Kabuki, Nō and Bunraku), Kabuki is the most lavish and flamboyant and appeals the most to Western audiences. Unlike the courtly Nō tradition, or the Bunraku puppet theater, Kabuki combines sheer spectacle, expressive artistry, opulent costume, violent dramatic action, and sometimes vulgar comedy into an intricately interwoven pattern of acting, singing, and dance. While many of the plays were adapted from the older Bunraku repertoire, some were written specifically for the Kabuki stage. Many of the stories came from historical or mythological sources. Others were derived from current events. Most are heroic tales, stories of chivalry, tragedy, romance, and exemplary behavior, populated by larger-than-life characters torn between contradictory duties and emotions. Such plots exemplify some of the problems inherent in Japan’s strictly ordered feudal society, conveying both the fascination and uneasiness with which the urban merchants regarded the severe moral codes of the ruling warrior elite.

The term Kabuki, which originally implied something shocking or out-of-the-ordinary, has since adopted the characters *ka* (song), *bu* (dance), and *ki* (act) – a more descriptive, if less colorful appellation. Kabuki evolved from an all-female theater that began on the banks of the Kamo River in Kyoto. The shogunate banned women from the stage in 1629, and young men in 1652, both for reasons of promiscuity. It is a testament to generations of dedicated actors that Kabuki has risen from its lowly beginnings to become one of the world’s most celebrated theatrical traditions.
There are many aspects of a Kabuki performance which may seem new and exotic to a non-Japanese viewer. These include the long auxiliary stage (hanamichi) on which performers make grand entrances and exits, the numerous trap doors concealed beneath the revolving stage through which villains make surprise appearances and escapes, and the traditional music and stylized manner of speech that enliven every performance. A group of professional clappers boosts the star’s morale by shouting his name enthusiastically during climactic scenes. Female roles are portrayed by onnagata — men specially trained to play women’s parts. Young boys who are the real or adopted sons of Kabuki actors also perform, displaying phenomenal discipline throughout extraordinarily lengthy scenes. Colorful costumes, elaborate choreography, and daring acrobatics provide a feast for the eyes. A single Kabuki program contains plays of many types (comedies, tragedies, dances, and ghost stories), and can last all day and well into the evening. It is because of the length of these performances, the concentration, and the years of rigorous training required, that the actors live almost all their lives on and behind the stages of Kabuki theaters. Most theatergoers do not sit through every scene of the many plays that are performed daily, but take time out for meals, snacks, conversation, and napping. The theater buildings are equipped with many floors of restaurants, shops, and souvenir stands, and the door remains open throughout the day. Strangest of all to the Western viewer is the notion that real Kabuki aficionados fight for seats at the premier of a season, and then leave the theater after the dramatic highpoints, but before the entire program is over.

Many of the characteristics of the Kabuki theater are vividly documented in the Ukiyo-e prints of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. This lively interplay between the fine and performing arts is grandly portrayed in the Art Institute’s superb collection of Japanese woodblock prints, one of the foremost assemblages of such works in the world. Artists such as Toyokuni, Kunimasa, Shunshō, and Sharaku exemplify the high point of this vigorous marriage of art and theater in the late eighteenth century — the impact of which has been felt in other Japanese media, and even in the art of the West.

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ARTIST: Name of print designer with life dates or known period of activity.
TITLE: Subject of print. In the case of actor prints, this includes the actor's name, the role portrayed, and the play title with English translation.
DATE: Year of the play production or print publication.

Artists' names appear in traditional Japanese order, family name first. Translations are approximate rather than literal, intended to convey the flavor of the original Japanese title.

1. OKAMURA MASANOBU
(1686-1764)
Perspective view of the interior of the Nakamura theater during the introduction of Ichikawa Ebizō as Yanone Gorō
In the premier of Miyahashira Taihei-ki (Account of the Central Column of a Shinto Shrine)
Dated 1740
Clarence Buckingham Collection, 1925.2285

2. IPPITSUSAI BUNCHŌ
(active c. 1760-1770)
Sakata Sajūrō I as Funayado no Sabu (?)
In Shuen Soga Ōmu-gaeshi (Polite Exchange at the Soga Banquet)
Performed 1768, second month
Clarence Buckingham Collection, 1928.999

3. IPPITSUSAI BUNCHŌ
(active c. 1760-1770)
Arashi Hinaji I as Yuya-gozen(?) being welcomed by his audience upon his return to Edo
Debut of Ima o Sakai Suehiro Genji (Turning Point of the Future Prosperity of Genji)
Performed 1768, eleventh month
Clarence Buckingham Collection, 1928.998

4. RANTOKUSAI SHUNDŌ
(active 1780-1792)
Ōtani Hiroji III as Satsuma Gengobei, and Nakamura Sukegorō II as Sasano Sangobei
In Iro-moyō Aoyagi Soga (The Green Pattern of the Soga Willow)
Performed 1775, second month
Frederick W. Gookin Collection, 1939.851-852

5. UTAGAWA TOYOHARU
(1735-1814)
Perspective view of the interior of the Nakamura theater
c. 1776
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Harold G. Henderson, 1962.998

6. KATSUKAWA SHUNSHŌ
(1726-1792)
Ōtani Hiroji III in otokodate (cavalier) attire
From the print series Azuma Ōgi (Fans of the East)
c. 1775
Clarence Buckingham Collection, 1928.987

7. KATSUKAWA SHUNSHŌ
(1726-1792)
Nakajima Mihouemon II as the minister SaIdaijin, and Ichimura Uzaemon IX (left), Ichikawa Ebizō III (center), and Ichikawa Yozō II (right) impersonating the triplets Umeo-maru, Matsuo-maru, and Sakura-maru
In Sugawara Denju Tenarai Kagami (Sugawara’s Secrets of Calligraphy)
Performed 1776, seventh month
Clarence Buckingham Collection, 1938.498

8. KATSUKAWA SHUNSHŌ
(1726-1792)
Sawamura Sōjūrō III in his dressing room conversing with the ownagata (female impersonator) Segawa Kikunōjō III
c. 1781
Clarence Buckingham Collection, 1938.496

9. KATSUKAWA SHUNKŌ
(1743-1812)
Onoe Matsusuke I as a mendicant priest
In Keisei Ide no Yamabuki (Courtesan: Lovely as Wild Roses of Ide)
Performed 1787, fifth month
Clarence Buckingham Collection, 1952.365

Left: RANTOKUSAI SHUNDŌ, Ōtani Hiroji III and Nakamura Sukegorō II (checklist no. 4)
10. KATSUKAWA SHUN'EI (1762-1819)
Asao Tamejirō I as the drunken Gotobi doing a sanbasō (dance prelude to a theatrical performance)
In Yoshitsune Koshigoe (Yoshitsune’s Petition to Cross the Barrier)
Performed 1790, ninth month
Frederick W. Gookin Collection, 1939.912

11. KATSUKAWA SHUN'EI (1762-1819)
Ichikawa Komazō III impersonating the princess Nyosan-no-miya, the Blind Man Ukare Zatō, and Sakata no Kaidōmaru
In Natsume Matsuri (Summer Festival)
Performed 1791, eighth month
Frederick W. Gookin Collection, 1939.921

12. KATSUKAWA SHUN'EI (1762-1819)
The fox-woman Kuzunoha doing a posture dance
From a print series of Oshie (Pressed Paper and Cloth Collages)
c. 1792
Clarence Buckingham Collection, 1925.2372

13. TOSHUSAI SHARAKU (active 1794-1795)
Iwai Hanshirō IV as the wet-nurse Shigeni
In Koi-nyōō Someiwa Tazuna (The Chosen-wife’s Multicolored Leadrole)
Performed 1794, fifth month
Clarence Buckingham Collection, 1934.198

14. TOSHUSAI SHARAKU (active 1794-1795)
Ōtani Oniji III as the manservant Edohei
In Koi-nyōō Someiwa Tazuna (The Chosen-wife’s Multicolored Leadrole)
Performed 1794, fifth month
Clarence Buckingham Collection, 1934.207

15. TOSHUSAI SHARAKU (active 1794-1795)
Bando Zenji as a Namazu-bōzu and Sawamura Yodorō II as Kawatsura Hōgan
In Yoshitsune Senbon-zakura (The Thousand Cherry Trees of Yoshitsune)
Performed 1794, fifth month
Clarence Buckingham Collection, 1934.209

16. UTAGAWA TOYOKUNI I (1769-1825)
Arashi Ryūzō (Toraya) as the monk Toji-bō
Print entitled Hatsu Akebono Kaomise Soga (The First Daybreak: Premier of The Soga)
Performed 1794, second month
Clarence Buckingham Collection, 1935.415

17. UTAGAWA TOYOKUNI I (1769-1825)
Iwai Hanshirō IV as Karanaya Ohana
In Irokigisu Ukino no Yozakura (The Colored Pheasant: Romance While Viewing Cherry Blossoms in the Evening)
Performed 1794, third month
Clarence Buckingham Collection, 1928.1075

18. UTAGAWA TOYOKUNI I (1769-1825)
Iwai Hanshirō as the peasant girl Otoma of Inamura-ga-saki
In Matsusa Misao Onna Kusunoki (Steadfast Woman of the Kusunoki Family)
Performed 1794, eleventh month
Clarence Buckingham Collection, 1925.3141

19. UTAGAWA TOYOKUNI I (1769-1825)
Sawamura Sōjūrō III as Satsuma Gengobei, and Arashi Ryūzō as an extoller
In Edo Sumago Kichirei Soga (Golden Sands of Edo: The Time-Honored Customs of the Soga)
Performed 1795, first month
Clarence Buckingham Collection, 1925.3151

20. UTAGAWA TOYOKUNI I (1769-1825)
Sawamura Sōjūrō III as the hero Ōboshi Yuranosuke, leader of the Forty-seven Loyal Retainers
In Edo no Hana Akō no Shiogama (Flowers of Edo: The Salt Pot of Akō)
Performed 1796, fourth month
Clarence Buckingham Collection, 1925.3142

21. UTAGAWA TOYOKUNI I (1769-1825)
Kataoka Nizaemon VII as Iyo no Tarō, and Iwai Hanshirō IV as Kojirō-gitsune of Okazaki (a female fox)
In Seiwa Nidar Ōyose Genji (An Assembly of Emperor Seiwa’s Second Generation)
Performed 1796, eleventh month
Clarence Buckingham Collection, 1925.3152

22. UTAGAWA TOYOKUNI I (1769-1825)
Sawamura Sōjūrō III as the packhorse-man Muchizō
In Miyamairi Misabu no Komigaki (Worship at the Fence of the Shinto Deity of Birth and Growth)
Performed 1797, eleventh month
Clarence Buckingham Collection, 1925.3136

23. UTAGAWA KUNIMASA (1773-1810)
Sawamura Sōjūrō III as Kiyomori-myōdō
In Genpei Hashira-goyomi (Block Calendar of the Rival Genji and Heike Clans)
Performed 1795, twelfth month
Clarence Buckingham Collection, 1925.730

24. UTAGAWA KUNIMASA (1773-1810)
Ichikawa Ebizo as Usui Aratarō
In the Shibanaku (Wait a Moment!) act of Seiwa Nidar Ōyose Genji (An Assembly of Emperor Seiwa’s Second Generation)
Performed 1796, eleventh month
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. James A. Michener, 1958.145
25. **UIAGAWA KUHIMASA** (1773-1810)
Kataoka Nizaemon VII as Iyo no Tarô
In *Senso Nisai Oyose Genji* (An Assembly of Emperor Seiwa's Second Generation)
Performed 1796, eleventh month
Frederick W. Gookin Collection, 1939.940

26. **UTAGAWA KUNISADA** (1786-1864)
Ichikawa Ebizô (Danjûrô VIII) as Shirafuji Genta
Print entitled *Ôkumi-iri Soga Nakanura* (The Return of The Soga to the Nakamura Theater)
Performed 1825, first month
Gift of Mrs. Everett D. Graff, 1972.381

27. **TOYOHARA KUNICHIKA** (1835-1900)
Ichikawa Udanji I as Kanshôjô (Sugawara Michizane)
In *Shinrei Sugawara Jikki* (Account of the Divine Sugawara Spirit)
Performed 1883, fourth month
Gift of Nathalie Gookin in memory of Frederick W. Gookin, 1983.587

28. **TOYOHARA KUNICHIKA** (1835-1900)
Onoe Kikugorô V as the villain Daiba no Jinzô (right), and Ichikawa Sadanji I as Itamiya Jûbei (left)
In *Sayo Kimuta Utsuya-toge* (Beating a Pounding Block at Utsuya Pass)
Performed 1883, eighth month
Gift of Nathalie Gookin in memory of Frederick W. Gookin, 1983.589

29. **TOYOHARA KUNICHIKA** (1835-1900)
Onoe Kikugorô V as the loyal retainer Torii Tsunememon
Print entitled *Go-fudoki Kabuki no Hon'yôni* (Reading a Play on the History of the Region)
Dated 1884
Gift of Nathalie Gookin in memory of Frederick W. Gookin, 1983.590

30. **TSUKIOKA YOSHITOSHI** (1839-1892)
Ichikawa Danjûrô IX as Musashibô Benkei
In *Kanjinchô* (The Subscription List)
Performed 1890
Frederick W. Gookin Fund, 1984.569

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**THE JAPAN FESTIVAL**
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Left: **UTAGAWA KUNISADA**, Ichikawa Ebizô (checklist no. 24)
Cover: **ISHIHARA SHIKAKU**, Ôtani Oniji III (checklist no. 14)