

## **A Brief History of Ukiyo-e.**

*Listening script.*

Ukiyo-e is a genre of Japanese art which flourished from the 17th through 19th centuries. Its artists produced woodblock prints and paintings of such subjects as female beauties; kabuki actors and sumo wrestlers; scenes from history and folk tales; travel scenes and landscapes; flora and fauna; and erotica. The term ukiyo-e can be translated as "pictures of the floating world".

Ukiyo-e first appeared in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, when Edo was made the center of government for the military dictatorship of Japan – the Shogunate. In Edo the merchant class, at the bottom of the social order, benefited most from the city's rapid economic growth, and kabuki theatre and the geisha of the pleasure districts became increasingly popular.

The term ukiyo ("floating world") was used to describe the hedonistic lifestyle of the city. Many ukiyo-e images were painted or printed in this period, and were used to decorate the homes of newly-wealthy merchants.

By the 1740s, multiple woodblocks were being used to print areas of colour. This led to full-colour becoming standard, each print made with numerous blocks.

Though some ukiyo-e was painted, most ukiyo-e was printed. Production was often divided between artist, carver, and printer. The artist designed the prints, the carver cut the woodblocks, and the printer inked and pressed the woodblocks onto hand-made paper. Finally, the work was financed, promoted, and sold by a publisher.

The portraits of beauties and actors by 18<sup>th</sup> century masters such as Kiyonaga, Utamaro, and Sharaku are prized by collectors, while in the 19th century a pair of masters are best remembered for their landscapes: the bold formalist Hokusai, whose *Great Wave off Kanagawa* is one of the best-known works of Japanese art; and the serene, atmospheric Hiroshige, most noted for his series *The Fifty-three Stations of the Tōkaidō*.

Following the deaths of these two masters, and due to the technological and social modernization that followed the Meiji Restoration of 1868, ukiyo-e production went into steep decline.

However, Ukiyo-e was central to forming the West's perception of Japanese art in the late 19th century—especially the landscapes of Hokusai and Hiroshige. From the 1870s Japonism became a prominent European trend and had a strong influence on the artists such as Degas, Manet, Monet, and van Gogh.