

Ukiyoe by Utamaro at the Art Gallery of NSW

Kitagawa Utamaro (c1753-1806) was a master of the Japanese woodblock print, *ukiyo-e*. Even if you haven't heard his name before, you have probably seen his work as Utamaro's pictures of beautiful Japanese women are considered to be supreme examples of the genre. The Art Gallery of New South Wales will hold the first exhibition of his work in Australia from 13 February to 2 May 2010.

Hymn to beauty: the art of Utamaro will feature more than 80 prints from the collection of the Asian Art Museum, National Museums in Berlin. Utamaro was a successful artist in his own lifetime. His talent was spotted by a leading *ukiyo-e* publisher and by the mid-1790s, his *bijinga*, images of beautiful women, were highly sought after by the people of Edo, as Tokyo was then known.

The women who were the subjects of his designs were often courtesans and their attendants, inhabitants of Yoshiwara, the licensed pleasure quarters in Edo, which together with the world of actors and entertainers was known as the 'floating world' or the *uki-yo*; the term *ukiyo-e* means 'pictures of the floating world'. But Utamaro also depicted ordinary women such as mothers with their children. No matter their background, Utamaro was considered to capture their beauty and sensuality with an unrivalled skill.

There is a restraint in the depiction of this sensuality. This is because artists and publishers needed to stay within the bounds permitted by the prevailing censorship laws laid down by the Tokugawa shogunate. In fact, Utamaro later fell foul of these laws and his success and fame did not prevent him being imprisoned during 1804 for a short period*.

Learn more

A symposium will be held on the opening day, Saturday 13 February, and a lecture series will examine Edo as the seat of the Tokugawa shogunate, popular culture in Edo and how the art of Edo was received in the West. Details of these events can be found on the Gallery's website.

*You can judge for yourself an image that may have led to Utamaro being punished. An *ukiyo-e* depicting Toyotomi Hideyoshi, the 16th century warlord who became imperial regent and grand minister of state, shows Hideyoshi with his five wives or concubines. Seen today the image appears quite innocuous. Find it online at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston website, www.mfa.org. Type in the accession number 11.4509-11 to see it. You can also view many more of Utamaro's works here. Note—look for Kitagawa Utamaro I; there is a later artist, Kitagawa Utamaro II.



Kitagawa Utamaro 'Hanaogi in Act 4' from the set *The Chushingura* Drama parodied by famous beauties: a set of twelve prints c1796 (above) and *Courtesan Miyahito of the Ogiya* c1793-94 (below)
Both: Asian Art Museum, National Museums in Berlin
Photography: Jürgen Liepe



Hymn to beauty: the art of Utamaro
13 February—2 May 2010
Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney
Adult \$8; Member/concession \$5; Family \$20
www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au