

## 60 Contemporary Japanese Prints

The exhibition "60 Contemporary Japanese Prints", celebrating the sixtieth anniversary of the Tikotin Museum of Japanese Art, is the outcome of a joint initiative between the Yoseido Gallery, Tokyo, and the Tikotin Museum. On this festive occasion we are delighted to exhibit works by sixty of the finest contemporary Japanese print artists. Fifty-seven artists decided to donate their works to the Museum collection at the close of the exhibition and the Yoseido Gallery donated the remaining three works to the Museum.

Modern Japanese art is essentially cosmopolitan because of the speed of information acquisition, the artists' travels, and the international exhibitions in which the artists participate. Every artist attempts in their works to reflect their natural exposure to things of the spirit, to current international art trends, and their personal approach to their environment, concretizing events in their own artistic 'vocabulary'. Naturally, the works in this exhibition are expressions of a broad range of subjects and styles.

As Japanese art encountered that of the West, its graphic medium changed. New methods of expression reached Japan at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, such as lithography, silkscreen, etching and engraving. These were added to the traditional techniques of stencil and woodblock prints, which had a long and glorious history in Japan but ceased to be the predominant art form. Nonetheless, traditional Japanese art and notions were not discarded in favour of the new - contemporary art is a synthesis of the heritage from home and external influences. Much like their counterparts in the West, Japanese print artists are seeking their way in the art of current international printmaking, both in content and in medium.

The central motif in the woodblock print "Landscape" by the artist **Aki Mana** is an arrangement of smudges and broad black lines on a light background. The lines and smudges appear to be spontaneously painted brush strokes. They are not symmetrically scattered on the print's surface, yet they convey a sense of balance in the work.

Animals, the figure of a monk wandering in endless snowy wastes, or whimsically-rendered figures of Shinto deities registered in monochrome with a small red patch on rough paper; these are hallmarks that this work can be only that of the artist **Akiyama Iwao** (1921-2014). Akiyama's woodblock prints convey a sense of roughness and "imperfection". He uses Japanese paper embedded with scraps of mulberry bark, and the paper is handmade from mulberry fibres. Deliberately departing from elegance or any attempt to beautify or refine his objects, Akiyama renders them as black, amorphous splashes, with rough outlines and no details. All of this

endows his work with the character of folk art, naïve and direct. In his work “*Yatagarasu*”, he depicts a crow with a mighty wingspan and three legs. *Yatagarasu* is a mythical crow sometimes illustrated in the East Asian arts. In Japanese mythology, this flying creature is witness to divine intervention in human affairs. For example, it is said that a large crow was sent by the gods to guide Emperor Jimmu, who, according to legend, was the first Emperor of Japan (660 BCE).

The subjects of **Andô Shinji**'s prints are flowers, plants, fruits and insects portrayed with great sensitivity of line and colour. Andô uses a flowing and complex pattern of lines, subtle colours and harmonious tones. Often, his images emerge from a soft shadow to a subdued light that imbues them with a sense of wonder, in which their inner beauty is surprisingly visible.

**Aoki Tetsuo** creates woodblock prints of a distinctive unique style. He creates elongated black and white figures of people, with little shading in the depiction of their clothing. The people's heads in Aoki's prints are relatively small in relation to their bodies. The artist's use of monochromatic shades is somewhat reminiscent of the traditional aquatint technique derived from etching. Sometimes there is a link between the characters in which Aoki writes the title of a work at the bottom of the page and the composition of the figures.

The print "Peanut War #15" by **Anzai Ayumi** depicts peanuts in their shells, bound together and laid in a pile. Peanuts are an excellent source of protein and perceived as a means of fighting malnutrition. This was the case during the U.S. Civil War, and they are used as an ingredient in products consumed in famine-stricken areas. The artist may have meant that peanuts are a means of fighting hunger, or maybe she imagined the jumble of peanuts to be combatants fighting one another.

The works of the artist **Baba Tomoko, Yamanaka Gen, Choi Eunji, Curtis F. Midori, Kobayashi Kiyoko, Sakazume Atsue, Ôishi Terumi, Sugawara Jirô,** and **Sano Hiroki** are characterized by simplicity and reduction. Although the works convey a sense of calm and naturalness, they are not simple at all. Simplicity is needed to deal with the complexity of life, and therefore it may be the most complicated thing of all, such that any intentional attempt to achieve simplicity is doomed to failure.

The woodblock print of artist **Chô Ryôta** depicts a fox (*kitsune*) holding a flower with its mouth and front legs. The fox has a cunning, and possibly cruel, look. Foxes are a common theme in Japanese folklore. Stories describe legendary foxes as intelligent beings possessing supernatural abilities that increase with age. A fox may

even assume human form and use this ability to outsmart people. Other stories portray them as faithful guardians, friends and lovers.

The monochromatic works of **Ebizuka Koichi** are composed of a dark surface covered with lines, over which are scattered dark or bright geometric shapes such as a circle, ellipse, triangle or square. The shapes appear in light shades on dark abstract areas that ignite the imagination and offer much space for contemplation.

**Endo Susumu's** prints combine photography, computer graphics and lithography. He photographs scenes from nature, scans and modifies them. He then transfers the image to a lithographic plate from which he prints the image on paper. Contemporary art recognizes the importance that many artists give to the concept of space in their work. In traditional Japanese art, empty space plays a central role and is considered no less important than the object that is depicted. Endo's works, which he calls "Space and Space", present technological and natural, virtual and figurative, spaces. The computerized manipulation is a 'membrane' that separates between the digital world, real space and artificial intelligence. These spaces become increasingly vague and indistinguishable in contemporary art.

The etching of **Fudezuka Toshihisa** depicts bright raindrops that fall to the ground in midsummer, creating concentric ripples of various sizes and rhythms. The tiny ripples of water spread and merge, forming a geometric lattice pattern on the surface of the water. Below the water's surface, additional circles are seen, reflecting the upper ripples.

**Hagiwara Hideo** adopted the characteristic abstract style of Western modernism as a means for expressing themes that are fundamentally Japanese. Hagiwara combines abstract expressionism with the world of imagination, using traditional Japanese woodblock technique to create prints with great visual depth. The print titled "Thousand Cranes" hints at the custom of making a thousand origami cranes strung together on threads. An ancient Japanese legend promises that anyone who folds a thousand origami cranes will be granted a wish by the gods. The common belief is that the paper cranes guarantee a person happiness, good fortune, or recovery from illness.

Artist **Hamada Michiko** creates woodblock prints based on photographs of people she knows from everyday life. Her prints relate a story or memory connected to her photographs. Looking at people differently, she manages to discover something about which she was previously unaware.

The print "60th Birthday Kimono" by **Hamanishi Katsunori** depicts a Japanese gown hanging on a special stand with the word *kanreki* inscribed in Chinese characters, meaning "60th Birthday", on the upper part of the gown. The two ancient pine trees symbolize blessings for longevity, and the wagon (*gosho-guruma*) on the lower part of the gown is decorated with chrysanthemum flowers. Chrysanthemums are also a symbol of longevity, rejuvenation and nobility. On the upper part of the kimono a red circle is drawn. The colour red symbolizes good luck and has the virtue of expelling evil spirits and illnesses.

The red, orange, yellow, and white hues in **Hirano Arika's** woodblock print "Flame" manage to convey the sense of combustion and ardour of flames arising from an unseen source. The angle of the flames adds to the feeling that gusts of wind are helping the fire spread within the space of the print.

**Hirosawa Jin's** print "Lazarus" portrays in red lines a man leaning on crutches. His face is red, with no eyes, nose or mouth. Under the red space of the print, orange and yellow cracks emerge, like lava bubbling beneath the surface. According to the Christian faith, Jesus resurrected Lazarus. Some believe that Lazarus is still walking among us, and since it is God who has resurrected him, neither time nor man can take his life.

**Inoue Kôzô** is known for his surrealistic silkscreen prints, which illustrate natural elements depicted in an unknown space. The lime in the print hovers over a black background. Inoue succeeds in creating a harmonious balance between the different elements even though his compositions are asymmetrical. Balance is achieved in the relationship between the shape of the object, its alignment and weight in the picture and the surrounding space.

For over ten years, **Kasai Masahiro** combines in his delicate silkscreen prints motifs of water, light, wind and rhythms of the natural world with a seasonal context. Kasai's mastery lies in the "*bokashi*" technique, where colour changes gradually from dark to light and subtly depicts the penetration of light in water. In his work "Blue Hole (I)", the centre of the blue hole is depicted in bright tones of blue and azure, while the margins of the print are illustrated in a dark, deep blue, as if the image is created looking out from within the depths of the sea.

**Kawamura Sayaka** believes that the creation of woodblock prints is like the process of building memories. The images are carved on several wooden panels and printed in layers, one on top of the other, creating complex scenes. The layers of colour are combined with each other and produce the image with the printing of the last

colour, in which dreams and reality unite. In Kawamura's prints, memories come to life and ephemeral dreams become tangible.

**Kitajima Yusuke** is a woodblock and monotype artist. The subjects of his prints are useful objects taken from daily life. In the print "Eraser", the object is shown from a perspective somewhat reminiscent of the *fukinuki yatai* (blown-off roof) style commonly used illustrated scrolls (*e-maki*) during the Heian era (794-1185). The basic visual feature of this style depicts an interior and exterior scene of a building in an axonometric bird's eye view, with the roof, ceiling and (sometimes) inner partitions removed. From this artistic perspective it is important in describing compositions through which human relations, and even emotions, are depicted. Sometimes this can create discomfort for the viewer, affirming the artist's intention.

In his work, **Kurita Masahiro** describes abstract forms that convey a feeling of dynamism and energy that fill the space. In his work "Melting 2019 B", we see a combination of geometric and figurative forms to which the black and gold colours give rhythm.

The work "In Front of the Mustached Face" by **Makino Hiroki** is both abstract and figurative. This monochromatic work consists of black and gray patches scattered in a space with variable density. The patches form a sort of figure with beard, mustache and eyes that look straight at the spectator. However, it is hard to tell if this is a human figure.

The lithograph "Gibier #1" (Gamefowl) by **Matsuda Osamo** depicts a cabbage and birds hanging like strung game in a closed and dark space. At its base lies halved pumpkin, a sweet potato, cypress tree fruit and a pigeon, or a pigeon figurine. On closer observation, it can be seen that the hanging birds are actually plush toys with attached manufacturer's tags.

**Miyamoto Noriwaki** combines realism with abstract elements in his work. They create an interesting pattern in clear and balanced compositions. In his work there is a marked tension between natural and abstract, and between the two- and three-dimensional. In his compositions, Miyamoto focuses on urban structures and easily interlocking colour planes.

**Mori Yoshitoshi** (1898-1992) specialized primarily in stencil prints (*kappazuri*). His works generally depict scenes from Kabuki theatre, or subjects related to folk traditions and festivals. The figures are presented simply but convey movement and great energy. In many cases, the figures are designed as a dynamic mass and in a

distorted form. The Mori print which illustrates the suicide scene from the play "Love Suicides at Amijima". The play, written by the Japanese playwright Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653 - 1724), tells of the complicated relationship between the courtesan Koharu and the married paper merchant Jihei. Many Kabuki plays during the Edo period (1600-1868) portrayed the experiences of a man who falls in love with a courtesan but cannot express his love for her because they do not belong to the same social class. As a result, they chose to commit "lovers' suicide" (*shinju*). Although the law during the period forbade lovers' suicide, those that committed it expressed an indictment of a society that would not allow them to realize their love.

**Morimura Rei** creates charming and detailed woodblock prints depicting gardens, famous temples and nostalgic scenes of rural areas from an unconventional and fresh perspective. Morimura has an exceptional ability to reinterpret very familiar themes, which sets him apart from other contemporary print artists. Contrary to the trends in today's thriving modern printmaking in Japan, he does not create in a purely abstract style. Unlike other woodblock artists, who use watercolours, Morimura uses oil-based inks to create his prints. He started out as a painter, using abstract and geometric shapes, and later turned to woodblock prints. The use of geometric shapes is noticeably evident in his prints. His style is expressed in "unnatural" and "flat" perspectives. His figures are often depicted from a high vantage point, and it is evident that he does not want to distinguish the figure from the background. The subject of his work is not realism; it is the textures and the tones.

Fuzzy lines and "post-apocalyptic" beauty characterize the photo etching of **Nakamori Hitoshi**. His attention is given to the unification of transient memory and the images perpetuated in the photo etching.

The animal in the work of **Nishimura Sayuri** is reminiscent of a monstrous wolf that resembles the gigantic Fenrir of Norse mythology. The atmosphere is dark and gloomy and evokes an apocalyptic feeling.

In his work "Flower Sermon," **Nishioka Fumihiko** depicts an incompletely illustrated figure. Serenity envelops the figure's face, like that of a monk sitting in meditation. The subject may be related to one of the Buddha's last sermons, which lends its name to this artwork. Buddha used to take his disciples to a quiet pond, where he would give a sermon. Near the end of his life, Buddha took his followers to the same pond, where they sat in a small circle around him and waited for his teaching. However, Buddha kept silent. He reached into the pond and pulled up a lotus flower. He held the flower quietly in front of his disciples, its roots dripping with mud and water. The confused students did their best to understand it. A key idea in Buddhist philosophy is the impermanence of our world, which is found in the cyclic process of birth and death. All phenomena are transient and temporary, just like the life of the flower that Buddha ended by plucking it. So, too, Buddha's life has also come to its end, and the figure in the print, half of which has disappeared, suggests this. An image of a pink flower appears three times on the figure.

The central theme of **Nose Masaki**'s prints is the connection between man and nature. Many of his works depict an old wolf surrounded by natural landscape. Presumably, the wolf is related to a primeval spiritual ritual that existed in different ancient cultures. The wolf in "Mountain Dweller" lies on the ground in an unknown place.

Blood is the throbbing force at the root of every living creature and constantly drives them. The lines and shapes in **Okuyama Naoto**'s prints depict a hidden and constantly changing flow of blood.

**Ômori Hiroyuki** tries to reveal in his prints the existence of an invisible universal power, using the mezzotint technique, which creates velvety black textures.

**Ôtsu Kazuyuki** illustrates the familiar and beloved landscapes of traditional Japan. The print "Bamboo Grove, Kyoto" depicts the path around the well-known bamboo forest in Arashiyama. Ôtsu manages to convey the sensation that the bamboo stalks are swaying gently back and forth with every light breeze. One can almost hear the rustling leaves and feels the tranquil atmosphere conveyed by the print.

The wood engraving by **Saitô Ryôta** illustrates a large, wide tree trunk standing in the forest. It is a witness to the age of the tree. In Japan, ancient trees were considered an abode of gods and a place of worship. In the print, the forest is enclosed in an amorphous form as if it were seen through a peephole.

The **Sakakibara Kei** etching "Forest in the Gorge" is reminiscent of ink paintings of misty and magical landscapes of lofty mountains, rivers and waterfalls. At the bottom of the print stands a large tree, with birds soaring beside it. The fog at the base of the tree hides animals depicted in fine lines. On the horizon, above awe-inspiring cliffs, birds are gliding. The birds appear to be a random and impermanent phenomenon, dwarfed by the forces of nature.

The figure looking directly at the viewer in the etching of **Shigeno Katsuaki** is a woman holding a kitten. To her right and left we see two more kittens in different positions falling from an unknown place. The elements of the print are portrayed with simplicity and innocence.

**Someya Yoshiyuki**'s delicate and complex woodblock prints are mostly monochromatic and only occasionally show a modest patch of colour. The main motif in the print "Border 86" is a carpet of dense, defined white lines undulating in different directions with areas of black background. The sense of dynamism in the print is achieved by the asymmetrical distribution in the space and the movement of the white lines, which is the crucial factor in the balance of the image.

**Shinoda Tôkô** and **Tatematsu Osamu** combine in their works lines reminiscent of calligraphy as well as abstract and geometric elements. These create a dialog between traditional Japanese art and contemporary art. The lines and patches of colour in the prints "Flame" and "Observation Zen II" are not concentrated in the centre of the

space because, if they were there, attention would be focused exclusively on them. When they are slightly offset, attention is drawn to the entire composition.

**Tamekane Yoshikatsu** chose to quote traditional Japanese art in his works by using gold or silver affixed to the paper, as was customarily done for paintings on folding screens and sliding doors that embellished Japanese aristocratic halls from the beginning of the 16th century. At the same time, his works are abstract and occasionally incorporate diverse figurative forms. Tamakane sometimes adds rich textures to his woodblock prints. These surfaces are made of threads, resin, paper and more. His prints constitute a study of time and space.

**Tsubota Masahiko, Yoshimatsu Jun'ichirô, and Tsuzukiyama Shigeki** create two-dimensional compositions of colour fields, textures and interrelated geometric forms. The relationship between the two-dimensional surface and the form and colour is central to their work.

Images of animals were - and still are - a favourite motif of painters and sculptors. Each era had its different styles of animal painting. In her prints, **Tsuchiya Misa** depicts animals in an unrealistic form. They have elongated or abnormal body parts and their joints sometimes bend in the wrong direction. Precisely by drawing animals in this unlikely manner, the artist endeavours to express their movement in nature.

**Tsuji Motoko** deals in her work with flowers and landscapes that we encounter in daily life. Some of her works are abstract, and some are figurative and dynamic. In her work "Shinning Wind 1", flowers are depicted as patches of red, yellow, and white, and it seems that she is trying to capture the movement of petals and pollen borne aloft by the wind.

The monochrome print "Work", by **Wada Toyoki**, presents humans, or fairies and other winged creatures around a circle containing flying creatures.

Many prints by **Wakatsuki Kohei** depict a leaf or plant against a gradually darkening background. As in Japanese *haiku* poetry, where apparently simple representations of a single aspect of nature is represented, the plant in the print is based on common personal recollections. This memory associates the picture's subject with a specific season. However, the work actually deals with a fourth dimension. This dimension is the scent of the leaves and flowers, which we need in order to be able to retrieve those memories.

**Watanabe Kanako's** prints are made by repeatedly printing the wooden blocks, both on the obverse and on the reverse sides of the paper. The process is very slow, and the tonal gradation created by the multiple layers gives



the print a mysterious sense of depth. Familiar places and old friends are hidden within the print, like a distant memory that slowly comes to mind, and reminds us of fragrances and tastes of the past.

The oil and acrylic painting "On an Earth" by **Watanabe Koichi** depicts a planet similar to Earth as it looks from outer space. It is painted on a circular panel. The many craters visible on snowy or overcast areas are evidence of meteor impact on the planet. This may be the future of our planet, according to Watanabe.

The lithograph by **Yamamoto Keisuke**, "The Silence of Light E – m ", is seemingly simple. A dark area of a large room with windows. The shape of the windows is diagonally cast on the floor by a soft evening light that penetrates the interior. Three chairs are scattered around the room. Two of them stand along the walls and another stands alone in the space. The print provides a glimpse into the Japanese aesthetic of *ma*. *Ma* is a space where the minimum necessary is expressed in order to elicit an experience in the viewer. For example, when a person sits in a theatre auditorium waiting for the beginning of a performance, if the stage is completely empty, the person is likely to assume he will remain passive. However, if a single chair is placed on the stage, even if it is the simplest chair, the spectator will try to imagine who will sit in the chair and what will be done with it.

In **Yanagisawa Noriko's** prints there are repeated motifs such as fossils, broken branches and human figures. These motifs are "concepts" in a language developed by Yanagisawa over the years, and they invite the viewer to "read" her works as if they were an open book. The symbols are closely linked to the acts of humankind on earth. The bull in the print "Mark VI" appears to be wounded, with blood flowing from its upturned head. He looks with a startled eye at the viewer, a fossil is drawn on its body. A fossil is a remnant of a plant or organism whose shape or body has been entirely or partially preserved. The fossil in Yanagisawa's prints symbolize "registration" in the book of nature. Is it man who has injured the bull? If so, the deeds of mankind are also commemorated in Yanagisawa's symbols.

The prints of **Yuasa Hiroshi's** evoke memories of traditional Japan. The narrow, elongated structure of the print "Autumn in Yoshima" resembles traditional Japanese pillar prints (*hashira-e*) and presents a first-rate design challenge for its planning and composition. Yuasa's print depicts a wooden house with a straw roof and trees in front of it. The image of the house is partly cut off, creating a sense that it is higher than usual. In the topmost branches of one tree hangs a single reddish fruit. This is perhaps the only feature of the season in the picture. It appears to be a persimmon tree (*kaki*) which yields its fruits in the fall. A bird circles above the tree branches. It seems to be about to swoop down on the last remaining fruit before the imminent winter.

**Zhuang Man's** mezzotint immortalizes the morning fog as seen in traditional ink landscape painting. The distant mountains gradually disappear in the heavy mist, and the more accentuated trees in the centre of the picture are testimony to the mysterious landscape, which is about to change any moment with the dissipating fog.

The contemporary Japanese print is, without a doubt, a living artform of the present day and appears to be universal. Yet its retention of refinement and aesthetics expresses the integration of the artistic traditions of the past. In contemporary art, the use of diverse print techniques, which are an international language of expression, and the different content embody the desires of the artists to deal with universal themes from their own personal point of view. However, to all of them there is at least one common denominator - absolute control of the various print techniques and their great precision of execution. Integrity and perfection are undoubtedly prominent elements of Japanese art heritage throughout the ages.

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