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**YOSHITOSHI'S STRANGE TALES: WOODBLOCK PRINTS FROM EDO TO MEIJI**  
*May 26–September 2, 2007*

“Floating world” woodblock prints feature the abnormal and supernatural while documenting transition in Japanese history

SAN FRANCISCO, CA, MAY 2, 2007: From May 26 through September 2, the Asian Art Museum will present *Yoshitoshi's Strange Tales: Woodblock Prints from Edo to Meiji*. The exhibition offers a rare opportunity to view one hundred superb color woodblock prints by Taiso Yoshitoshi (1839–1892), the last great master of *ukiyo-e*, whose career straddled two eras. During his lifetime Japan was forced to come to terms with the outside world, from which it had been isolated for two hundred years. The prints on view in the exhibition—borrowed from noted private collections—are presented chronologically and there are two main themes: the ways Yoshitoshi's work reflected Japan's radical transformation, and the development of his style over more than three decades. Organized and curated by John Stevenson, a scholar and the author of many publications on the artist, *Yoshitoshi's Strange Tales* will be on view in the museum's Hambrecht Gallery, and consist of two separate presentations: fifty prints will be on view through July 8, and a second grouping of fifty prints will be on view July 11 through September 9. The exhibition will be closed on July 10 to accommodate the rotation.



“Mount Yoshino Moon at Midnight—Iga no Tsubone,” 1886, from the series *One Hundred Phases of the Moon, Tsuki hyakushi*, by Taiso Yoshitoshi (1839–1892). Signed: *Yoshitoshi*. Woodblock print, ink, and colors on paper. Collection of Harvey Garneau Jr.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, Japan was struggling to transform itself from a feudal state into an imperial nation. This swift and radical transition, unprecedented in Japan's history, caused a descent into chaos and civil war. The Japanese people were thrust into turmoil in every aspect of their lives—political, social, economic, cultural, and artistic. Some of prints in *Yoshitoshi's Strange Tales* are responses to changes in the culture during this uncertain time.

Numbering among the print artists who survived the turmoil, Yoshitoshi went on to create a body of masterpieces, for which he achieved renown. In the era that followed, when

many Japanese were becoming overeager to assimilate Western tastes, however, ukiyo-e came to be considered passé. Yoshitoshi's work was overshadowed—and then forgotten. It was only in the late 1960s that he was rediscovered and was once again appreciated for his mastery.

Ukiyo-e originally meant pictures of the “floating world” of entertainment; these pictures depicted Kabuki actors, courtesans, and landscapes. Yoshitoshi preferred different subjects, especially stories from Japan's folklore and history. *Yoshitoshi's Strange Tales* is built around two series: *One Hundred Ghost Tales of Japan and China*, which the artist designed at the beginning of his career, and *New Forms of Thirty-Six Strange Things*, which he designed at the end. Both deal with supernatural happenings and contain similar subject matter, but stylistically they are so different that they could be by different artists.

Putting these series in context are prints from throughout Yoshitoshi's career that show the maturing of his work within a changing Japan, including the contemporary urban tales he illustrated for Tokyo newspapers. Colors are intense, gestures histrionic. In his last series, *One Hundred Phases of the Moon*, the artist moves beyond the swirl of momentous events to depictions of individual emotions. The exhibition reveals a traditional culture moving at breakneck speed into the modern world.

Among the first grouping of prints on view from May 26 through July 8 is *Saito Oniwakamaru and the Carp*, dated 1873, from the series *Essays by Yoshitoshi*. This print depicts Oniwakamaru, the “Little Devil” (the childhood nickname of the legendary warrior-priest Benkei, 1155–1189), trying to kill a giant carp that had attacked and eaten his mother when she fell into its pool. Oniwakamaru, looking robust, is riding on the back of the giant fish, holding a knife in his teeth. The scales of the fish are carefully delineated and make a striking pattern against the blue water. In spite of the gruesome story, the scene Yoshitoshi created is not only dynamic but graceful.

Another print on view in the first presentation, *A Geisha in the Snow*, 1880, is from the series *Twenty-Four Hours at Shinbashi and Yanagibashi*. In this serene print Yoshitoshi depicts a geisha setting out for a midnight assignment accompanied by a male attendant, who holds an umbrella for her; against the dark background, snow falls lightly. Over her traditional kimono, the geisha wears a plaid woolen shawl, which during the Meiji period (1868–1912) would have been a novel import from the West. This evocative scene shows that Yoshitoshi was able to depict contemporary subjects in a traditional style.

In the early Meiji period, Shinbashi and Yanagibashi were the of two most popular entertainment districts in Tokyo (called Edo until 1868). Yoshitoshi is said to have been particularly fond of the Shinbashi geisha. In the series *Twenty-Four Hours at Shinbashi and*

*Yanagibashi*, he interpreted each hour of the geisha's day; the title on the upper right of this print indicates that the scene takes place at midnight.

*Short-Sighted Old Man and Ineffectual Ghost*, dated 1881, from the series *Crazy Pictures of Famous Places in Tokyo*, is also on view through July 8. For this half-size print, Yoshitoshi designed an amusing ghostly scene and signed it "Yoshitoshi giga" (drawn playfully by Yoshitoshi). In a cemetery, a short-sighted old man appears unconcerned about a ghost's attempts to scare him. In his effort to see the ghost more clearly, the man holds his eyeglasses close to the lantern. He appears to be amused as the ghost rises from a grave pulling a face.

The man wears a plaid woolen shawl, which during the Meiji era (1868–1912) would have been a novel import from the West. The rightfacing swastika on the gravestone is an ancient Buddhist symbol. The word *kyoga* in the title of this print can be translated as "crazy" or "outrageous" and implies something satirical or having a sense of humor, a quality that has long been an undercurrent in Japanese art.

*The Old Woman Retrieves Her Arm*, dated 1889, from the series *New Forms of Thirty-Six Strange Things*, illustrates the well-known old supernatural story in which Watanabe no Tsuna cut off the arm of the demon Ibaraki near the Rashomon Gate in Kyoto (in the year 976). Watanabe took the arm home and put it in a box, storing it in a secure place. In order to seize the arm back, Ibaraki visited Watanabe disguised as his aunt, insisting that Watanabe show the arm to him. When Watanabe gave in, the demon grasped the arm and flew off, revealing his true form.

This story was made into popular plays in the Noh and Kabuki traditions. Yoshitoshi's print represents a moment in a Kabuki version of 1883, in which the disguised Ibaraki seized his cut-off arm and fantastically transformed himself back into a demon, the actor bouncing down the apron of the stage showing the claws beneath his white robes. The evil-looking face, gnarled arm, and grotesque claws protruding from old woman's feet in this print reveal Ibaraki's horrible nature.

A print on view in the second grouping, on view July 11 through September 2, offers an example of Yoshitoshi addressing Japanese society in transition. *Kanasugi Bridge at Shibaura*, 1863, from the series *The Tokaido Highway, Tokaido*, depicts a moment in the journey of Tokugawa Iemochi (1846–1866), the fourteenth shogun of the Tokugawa line, from Edo (present-day Tokyo) to Kyoto. The shogun traveled to the court in order to discuss the possibility of rescinding the imperial order to expel foreigners from Japan. For more than three hundred years Tokugawa shoguns had ruled Japan, including the imperial court, from their grand castle in Edo;

Iemochi's trip was unprecedented and clearly indicated that the shogunate's power and authority were weakening.

The direct cause for the fall of the shogunate was the arrival in 1853 of the so-called black ships, a squadron of American warships under the command of Commodore Matthew Perry, whose mission it was to pressure Japan to open its ports to American vessels. Perry's negotiations with the shogun's high officials were highly successful, resulting in the signing of the Kanagawa Treaty the following year. This incident left the Japanese people longing for the fall of the shogunate, which could no longer protect them, and a return to imperial rule.

Kanasugi was a famous fishing village on the Tokaido Highway during the Edo period (1615–1868). This site had been made familiar to the Japanese through woodblock prints by such artists as Ando Hiroshige (1797–1858).

*Yoshitoshi's Strange Tales* is on view concurrently at the Asian Art Museum as the exhibition, *Tezuka: The Marvel of Manga*, an exhibition showcasing the work of Tezuka Osamu (1928-1989), and icon of the manga (Japanese comics) movement. The two exhibitions offer interesting comparisons. Japanese woodblock prints are often considered forerunners to *manga*; indeed it was a great Japanese woodblock artist, Hokusai, who first popularized the term with his collections of whimsical sketches beginning in 1814. There are important differences; for example, the essence of modern *manga* is the way they tell a story in a streamlined, episodic way, whereas woodblock prints tell their tales in a single sheet, often filled with extraordinary detail. But both are graphic art produced as commercial products for the visually literate Japanese mass market.

**Media Preview:**

A media preview *Yoshitoshi's Strange Tales* will be held in conjunction with a preview for *Tezuka: The Marvel of Manga* on Wednesday, May 30, 2007, from 9:30 AM to 1:00 PM, with a gallery walk-through at 10:45 AM led by Yoko Woodson, curator of Japanese art at the Asian Art Museum. Complimentary refreshments will be served. Please RSVP by Monday, May 28 to [pr@asianart.org](mailto:pr@asianart.org) or call (415) 581-3712.

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**About the Asian Art Museum**

The Asian Art Museum is a public institution whose mission is to lead a diverse global audience in discovering the unique material, aesthetic, and intellectual achievements of Asian art and culture. Holding nearly 16,000 Asian art treasures spanning 6,000 years of history, the museum is one of the largest museums in the Western world devoted exclusively to Asian art. Once located in Golden Gate Park, the museum now resides at its new, expanded facility at Civic Center Plaza. An architectural gem featuring a dynamic blend of beaux arts and modern design elements, the museum's new home is the result of a dramatic transformation of San Francisco's former main library building by renowned architect Gae Aulenti (designer of Paris's Musée d'Orsay) into a showcase for the museum's acclaimed collection and exhibitions.

- **Information:** (415) 581-3500 or [www.asianart.org](http://www.asianart.org).
- **Location:** 200 Larkin Street, San Francisco, CA 94102.
- **Hours:** The museum is open Tuesday through Sunday from 10:00 am to 5:00 pm, with extended hours until 9:00 pm every Thursday.
- **Admission:** \$12 for adults, \$8 for seniors, \$7 for youth 13–17, and free for children under 12. Thursday evenings after 5 pm admission is just \$5 for all visitors except those under 12 and members, who are always free. **Target Tuesdays:** The museum offers FREE admission to all on the **first Tuesday** of every month, courtesy of Target Stores
- **Access:** The Asian Art Museum is wheelchair accessible. For more information regarding access, please call (415) 581-3598; TDD: (415) 861-2035.

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