

U K I Y O - E



21/10/16 – 12/02/17
THE FINEST JAPANESE PRINTS
EXHIBITION AT THE
CINQUANTENAIRE MUSEUM



Ukiyo-e is a once in a lifetime exhibition that will display more than 400 of the very best Japanese prints specially selected from the Museum's outstanding collection of 7500 Japanese prints - a collection renowned for its extraordinary quality and one that has been heavily drawn on for major retrospectives in Japan itself. The time is now right for a special display in Brussels.

This exhibition will offer a rare and comprehensive review of the art of Japanese prints from the black and white beginnings to the superb polychrome series of the late 19th century that proved so important to the development of Western taste. In addition, other contemporary Japanese objects, such as lacquerware, a kimono

and armour, will also be displayed to further develop an understanding of the cultural context of these wonderful works of art.

Ukiyo-e will be an exceptional event and will allow the public to share a new and beautiful vision of Japan in an exhibition the range and importance of which has not been seen in Belgium for over more than 25 years.

In 2016, Japan and Belgium celebrate their 150 years of diplomatic and friendship relations. The *Ukiyo-e* exhibition will be one of the highlights in the varied program of events planned for this festive year.



UKIYO-E

The Japanese term *ukiyo-e* means literally “pictures of the floating world”. The term “floating world” (*ukiyo*) originates in Buddhism, and refers to earthly life characterised by suffering and transitoriness. Over time, this negative connotation disappeared and since the 17th century the term *ukiyo* has been synonymous with a world of fleeting pleasures. It is this hedonistic meaning that is paired with the suffix *e* (“picture”) in the term *ukiyo-e*.

Although *ukiyo-e* originally referred to painting, nowadays it is associated with **traditional print-making**. Traditional wood engraving, or xylography, experienced a spectacular rise in popularity in the 17th century when commercial production evolved to satisfy an growing wealthy middle-class clientele in Edo (present-day Tokyo), seat of the Shogun court. Initially, the most popular subjects depicted were feminine beauty and *kabuki* actors.



THE EXHIBITION

In order to appreciate the refinement of these prints it is important to understand how they were made. The exhibition begins with a display of the tools used to carve the woodblocks, the woodblocks themselves, proofs and a film, explaining the **techniques** of the art of Japanese woodblock printing.

Next comes a **chronological display** featuring the great masters and the major themes of woodblock printing, with a representative selection from the early days in the last decades of the 18th century, to the first half of the 20th century.

From the late **18th century** onwards, artists such as Harunobu, Shunsho, Kiyonaga, Utamaro and Sharaku found fame with their prints of courtesans (*bijin-ga*) and actors (*yakusha-e*), the stars of Edo's night life. In the 19th century, landscape (*fukeyi-ga*) came into its own as a subject-matter, with emblematic artists such as Hokusai and Hiroshige.

The **second half of the 19th century** saw major upheavals in Japan. Contemporary themes such as the opening up of Japan to the outside world, the arrival of Westerners and the modernisation of Japan are reflected in the prints of the time.



There were also many changes in the world of graphic art : with the introduction of new techniques such as lithography and photography, traditional printmaking fell into decline. In danger of disappearing altogether, it underwent a revival at **the beginning of the 20th century**. The exhibition comes to a close with the results of this movement, known as *shin hanga* (literally : new prints).

Alongside the chronological exhibition a number of **specific themes** germane to the exhibition are explored:

Accordingly, special attention has been paid to the luxurious privately-commissioned publications or **surimono**, which used the finest printing techniques and were produced in limited editions for Edo's very exclusive poetry societies.



Also featured are “pictures of spring” or *shunga*, as erotic prints are called.

In Osaka, with its particularly demanding clientele from the rich intelligentsia, there evolved between 1810 and 1830 a small but high-quality production of pictures of *kabuki* theatre (*kamigata-e*). Although less well-known than the prints of the Edo school, they are in no way inferior in terms of quality. The Cinquante-naire Museum possesses over 650 *kamigata-e* of excellent quality ; a special section of the exhibition will be devoted to them.





THE CATALOGUE

The catalogue (FR/NL) is a publication aimed at the general public introducing Japanese prints and the Museum's collection. The illustrations are of great importance: the choice of paper and the quality of reproduction must reflect the refinement of Japanese prints.

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GENERAL INFORMATION

VENUE

Main exhibition room
of the Cinquantenaire
Museum

CALENDAR

21/10/16 – 12/02/17

CATALOGUE

354 prints, 10 essays

EXHIBITION

421 prints (part 1: 240 +
part 2: 231) : **for conser-
vation reasons, most of
the prints will have to be
replaced half way through
the exhibition. (19/12/2016)**

Around ten showcases
of items relating to the
prints: kimono, painting
scroll, armour, lacquered
combs & hair pins, etc.

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