

Japanese Prints

A Brief Illustrated Survey

(Note: The question of where to set the dividing line between eras is subject to a broad range of interpretation. Choice of date subdivisions here is strictly my own. - Tom Silver)

Early Edo Period (1670-1765)

The first prints were monochrome, using black ink which typically derived from pine charcoal and then was applied to a single wood block. These prints are known as *sumi-e*. By the early 1700s color was added - but by hand, since the problem of carving a design in perfect registration across multiple color blocks had not yet been solved. By the 1740s a method of alignment was devised which cut shallow registration slots known as *kento* into each color block. Print paper could then be transferred from one block to another to take on multiple colors accurately. The paper was dropped into slots which were identically located on each block, assuring uniform alignment.

This system allowed multiple color inks to be applied exactly where intended on the paper. Typically only two color blocks were used at first - inked with pink and green respectively. These 1740s prints are known as *benizuri-e*. But in 1765 Suzuki Harunobu expanded the number of color

blocks to five or more, producing the first true multi-color Japanese prints (known as *nishiki-e*).

Edo period prints from inception in the 1670s right through the 18th century primarily featured kabuki actors and courtesans as their subject matter. The earliest figures were portrayed as androgynous, with a later shift to generic male and female figures lacking in individuality.

Representative designers: Moronobu, School of Kaigetsudo, Masanobu, Toyonobu, Harunobu, Shunsho



Moronobu, *Lovers In an Autumn Meadow*, c. 1680 (Sumi-e)



School of Kaigetsudo, *Courtesan*, c. 1710 (Hand colored)



Harunobu, *Woman Admiring A Blossoming Tree At Night*, c. 1766 (Color blocks)

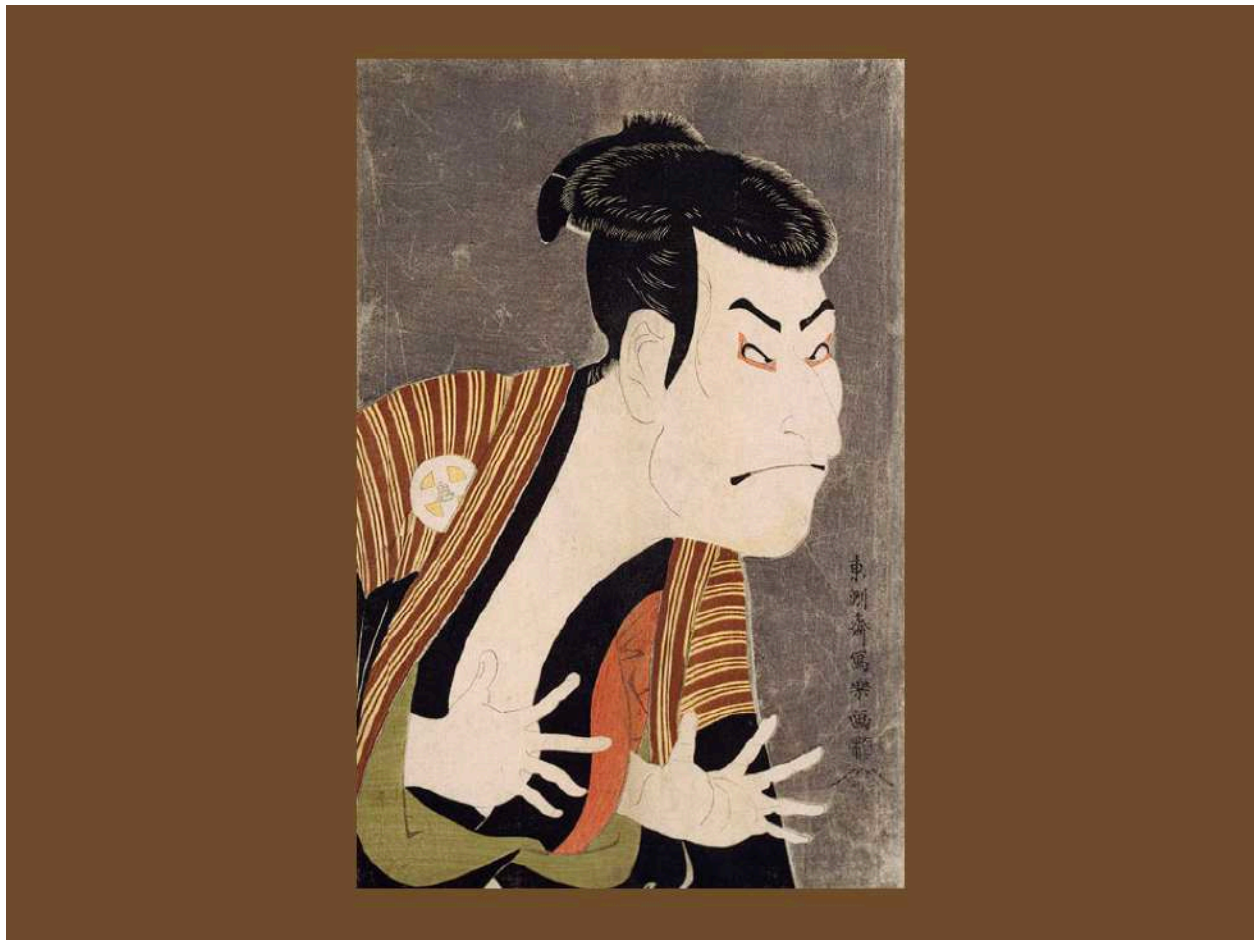
Mid Edo Period (1765-1830)

By the 1790s - particularly in the work of Kitigawa Utamaro, figures were characterized by individual personality and psychological depth. The era of androgynous or generic figures was largely gone. Early in the 19th century print subjects began to transition from courtesans and kabuki actors to landscapes - along with real and fictionalized heroes and events from Japanese history, literature and legend. The transition was pretty much complete by the 1840s.

Representative designers: Utamaro, Sharaku, Toyokuni, Toyoharu



Utamaro, *Fukaku Shinobu Koi*, c. 1793-94



Sharaku, Kabuki Actor Print, c. 1794-95

Late Edo Period (1830-1867)

This period saw the full flowering of the classic Japanese print. Hokusai and Hiroshige landscapes were best sellers, both in Japan and later in the 19th century throughout the West. Kunisada's actor prints and triptych masterpieces along with Kuniyoshi's heroes of Japan's past and

his grotesque monsters rivaled or surpassed Hokusai and Hiroshige in popularity.

Representative designers: Hokusai, Hiroshige, Kunisada, Kuniyoshi



Hokusai, *Under the Wave Off Kanagawa*, c. 1830



Hiroshige, *Plum Garden At Kameido*, 1857



Kunisada, Triptych - *Prince Genji Viewing Plum Blossoms At Night*, c. 1847-52



Kuniyoshi, Triptych - Crocodile Shark, 1851

Note: The three Edo periods described above are known in combination as “Ukiyo-e” (“Pictures of the Floating World”).

Meiji Period (1868-1912)

In 1868 the Japanese emperor was restored to power after centuries of playing a subordinate role to the Tokugawa shoguns. A policy of Westernization soon followed, and touched virtually every aspect of Japanese custom and culture. Many 19th century prints featuring landscapes, historical and literary subjects did survive the shift to Westernization in the Meiji era. But that era in prints is usually remembered today for its depiction of Westerners in Japan, along with Japanese adoption of Western clothing styles, architecture, and technology (trains and photography are just two examples). Later Meiji prints which glorified victorious Japanese battles in wars against China and Russia also contribute to defining the era.

Early Meiji prints featured garish synthetic (chemical) color inks, and are widely disparaged today as the low point in Japanese print history. But this period also includes some of the greatest of all Japanese print designers - Yoshitoshi and Chikanobu - whose best work built on centuries of tradition.

Representative designers: Yoshitoshi, Chikanobu, Yoshitora, Kiyochika, Gekko, Toshikata



Yoshitora, Triptych - An Accurate Picture of the Mitsui Building, Tokyo, 1874



Yoshitoshi, *Moon Above the Sea At Daimotsu Bay*, 1886



Chikanobu, Triptych - *Cherry Blossom Viewing*, 1894



Toshikata, *Catching Fireflies*, 1901

Shin Hanga ("New Prints") Period (1915-late 1950s)

Importation of contemporary Western technology in the Meiji era - specifically photography, lithography and later, offset printing - posed a serious challenge to Japanese prints. These new methodologies allowed for far less expensive replication of images than the completely manual process of producing traditional prints in Japan.

Recognizing the challenge to centuries of tradition, an enterprising businessman with artistic sensibilities by the name of Shozaburo Watanabe almost single-handedly saved the classic Japanese print, and the manual process by which it had been produced since the 1670s. His first step was to search out talented young artists trained in Western painting at newly established Japanese art schools. Watanabe's concept was to combine time-honored Japanese print subjects long revered in the West for their romanticized, idyllic portrayal of Japan, with western ideas about painting. Use of facial shading to achieve volume is a prime example. Atmospheric ("aerial") perspective in landscapes is another. Watanabe also preserved the collaborative system of creating prints, by which a small group of artisans worked together to create a finished print (see "Sosaku Hanga" immediately below.)

The Japanese themselves were not much impressed with Watanabe's bold shift from tradition to Shin Hanga, and so the West - primarily America - became his prime market. Watanabe's marketing method was to exhibit work by his most talented designers. These exhibitions at American museums always included a large helping of extra impressions

shipped from Japan which were snapped up by eager American art collectors.

Representative designers: Hashiguchi Goyo, Torii Kotondo, Ito Shinsui, Kawase Hasui, Kiyoshi Kobayakawa, Ohara Shoson, Natori Shunsen



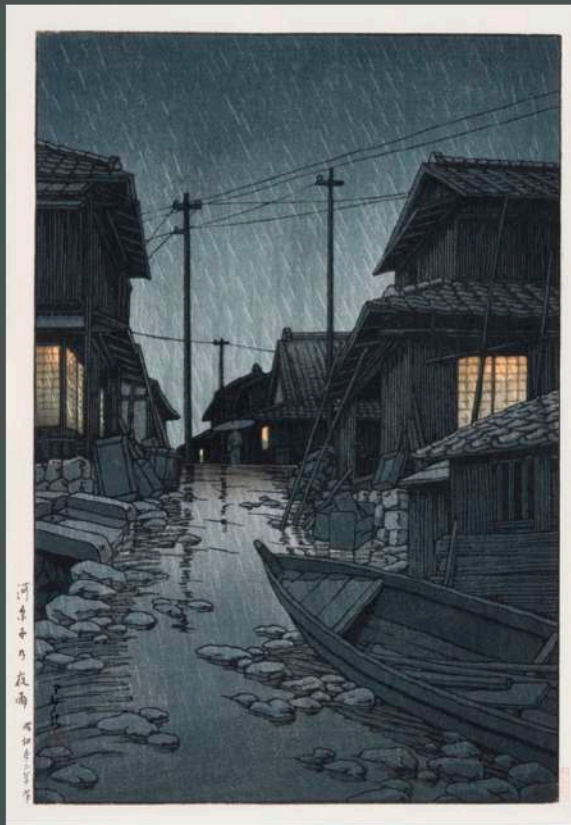
Hashiguchi Goyo, *Woman In A Summer Kimono*, 1920



Natori Shunsen, *Actor Nakamura Fikusuke IV as the Smuggler Soshichi*, 1927



Torii Kotondo, *Nagajuban*, 1929



Kawase Hasui, *Night Rain At Kwarako*, 1947

Sosaku Hanga (“Creative Prints”) Period (1904-)

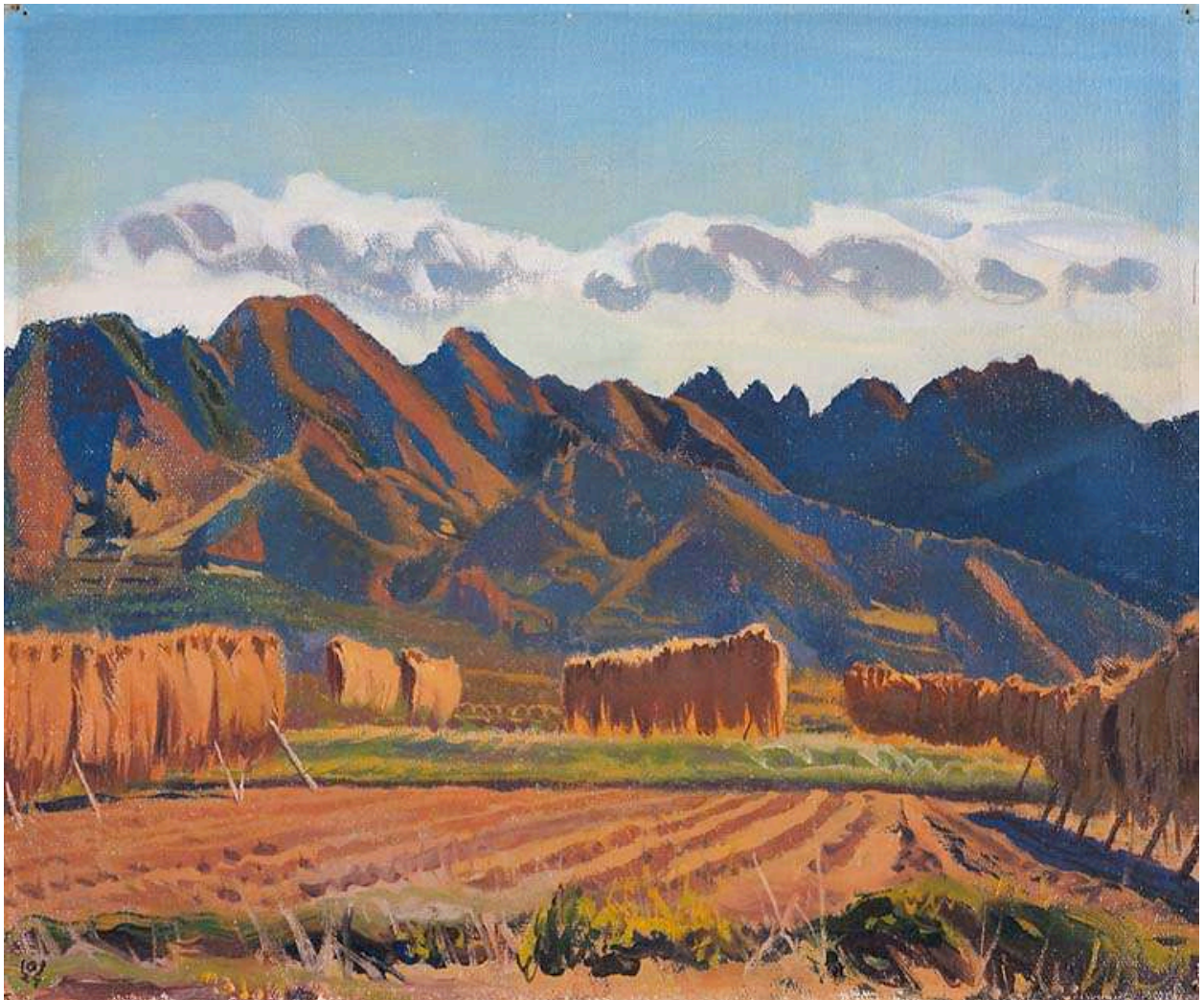
Sosaku Hanga artists broke free of the centuries-old collaborative system in which print making was divided among four parties - a publisher who came up with the idea for a subject, an artist who created the initial design sketch for that idea, a wood engraver who carved the sketch into one or more wood blocks, and a printer who applied ink to those blocks. So rather than farm out most of the work, Sosaku Hanga artists with few exceptions did it all themselves. (This is why the term “artist” is applicable more to Sosaku Hanga than to other periods of Japanese print history, when the print making process was shared. In those periods a “designer’s” work was limited to creating a sketch, with details often filled in by others.)

From the beginning Sosaku Hanga was heavily influenced both by impressionism and early 20th century post-impressionism in Western painting. Artists felt free to create prints which broke through centuries-old ukiyo-e boundaries. Subject matter shifted dramatically from traditional Japanese print themes to encompass artists’ full imaginative range.

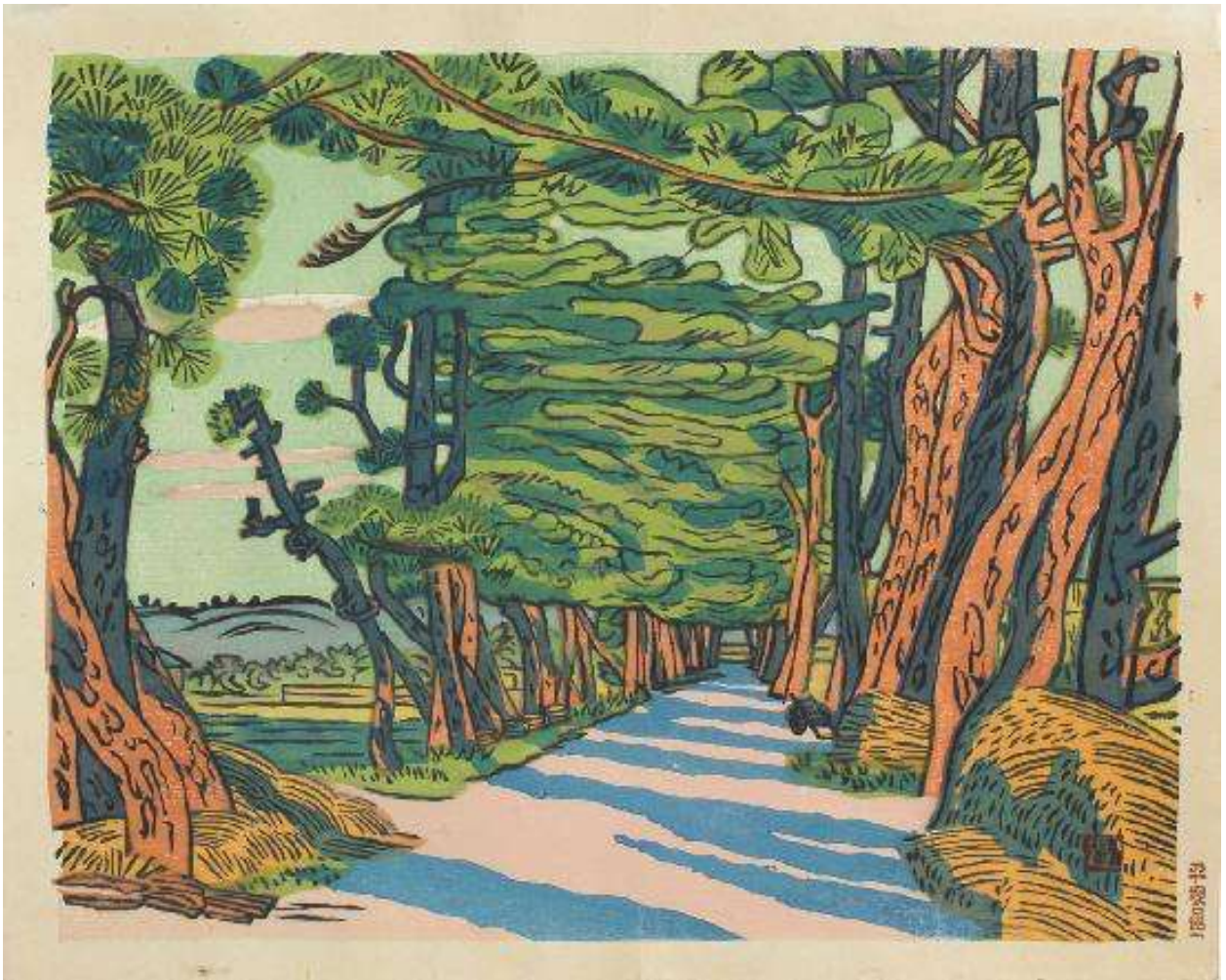
The term “Sosaku Hanga” is not much used for prints created in the decades beyond the 1960s, though contemporary print makers - Japanese or not - continue to work in the Sosaku Hanga tradition without assistance from engravers or printers. In the last half of the 20th century international print styles converged, resulting in many prints

created by Japanese artists losing most or all of their specific Japanese identity.

Representative artists: Kanae Yamamoto, Kiyoshi Saito, Unichi Hiratsuka, Inagaki Tomoo, Shiko Munakata



Kanae Yamamoto, *French Pastoral in Spring*, c. 1913



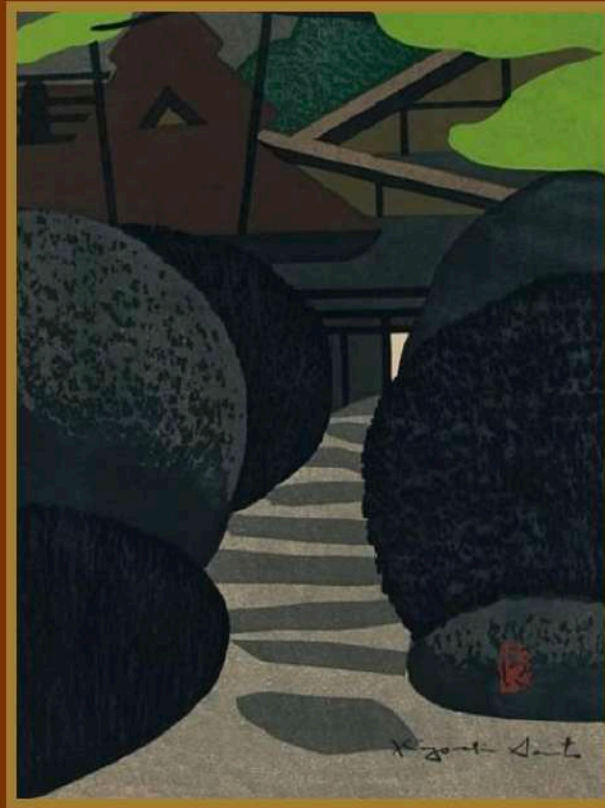
Un'ichi Hiratsuka, Pine Avenue of Tsuda, 1949



Inagaki Tomoo, *White Cat*, 1957



Shiko Munakata, Katyayana: from The Disciples of Buddha, 1960



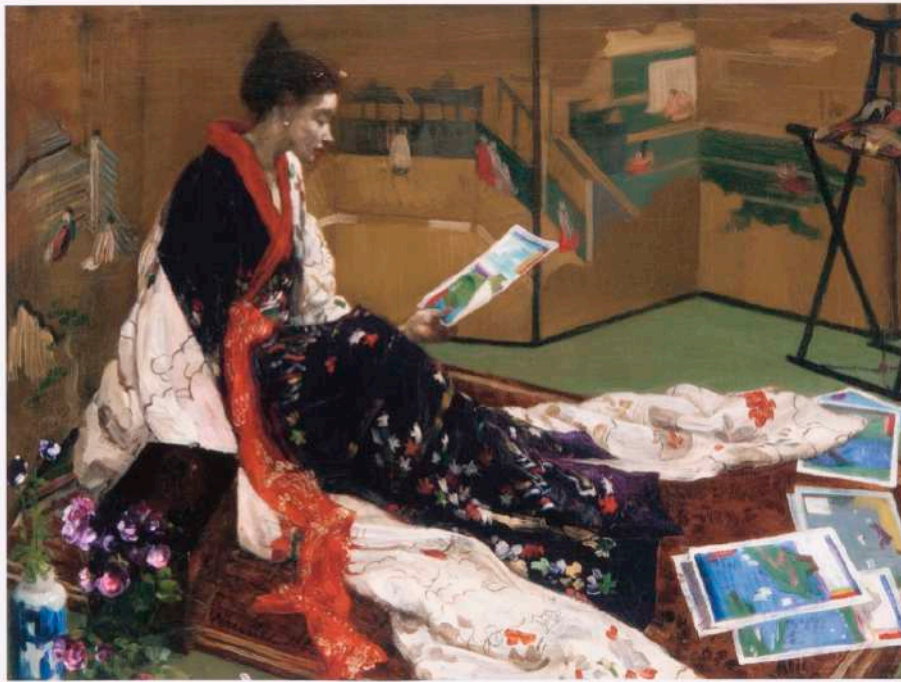
Kiyoshi Saito, *Shisen-do Kyoto*, 1963

Japonisme and 20th C Western Expatriates in Japan

Japanese prints and many other aspects of Japanese culture captivated the West in a later 19th century virtual obsession known as *Japonisme*. The French Impressionists were bowled over by these prints, and collected them. Monet's collection can still be seen at Giverny. Toulouse Lautrec's poster art as we know it would not exist had Lautrec been unfamiliar with Japanese prints. But for the most part Western artists

who would come to devote some or all of their careers to print-making in the Japanese style had to await the 20th century. Below are three famous examples of *Japonisme* expressed in Western painting, along with three prints and one color etching by four of the best known expatriate Westerners working in the Japanese print style.

Representative artists: Charles W. Bartlett, Helen Hyde, Elizabeth Keith, Paul Jacoulet, Clifton Karhu, Paul Binnie



Whistler, Caprice In Purple and Gold, 1864



Monet, La Japonaise, 1876



Vincent van Gogh, Portrait of Père Tanguy, 1887



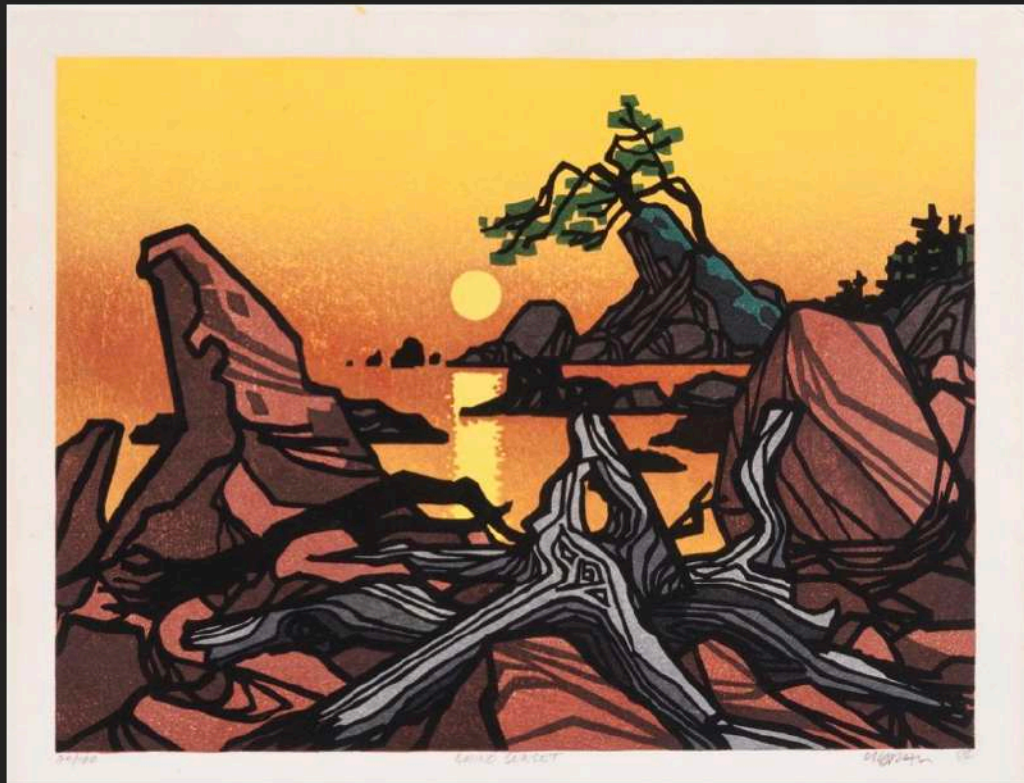
Helen Hyde, The Bath, 1905



Elizabeth Keith, *Chinese Lady*, 1934 (Color etching)



Paul Jacoulet, *Chinese Beauty*, 1935



Clifton Karhu, *Amino Sunset*, 1984

