

Floating
World:
The Influence
of Japanese
Printmaking





Ando Hiroshige, *Uraga in Sagami Province*, from the series *Harbors of Japan*, 1840-42, color woodcut, collection of Ginna Parsons Lagergren

Utagawa Kuniyoshi, *Poem by Sarumaru Tayû: Soga Hakoōmaru*, from the series *Ogura Imitations of One Hundred Poems by One Hundred Poets*, 1845-48, color woodcut, collection of Jerry & Judith Levy

Floating World: The Influence of Japanese Printmaking

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Floating World explores the influence of Japanese *ukiyo-e* woodblock printmaking on American and European artists from the late 19th century to the present. A selection of Japanese prints sets the stage for Arts & Crafts era works by Charles Bartlett, Elizabeth Colborne, Arthur Wesley Dow, Frances Gearhart, Edna Boies Hopkins, Bertha Lum and Margaret Jordan Patterson. Woodcuts by Helen Frankenthaler illuminate connections between Abstract Expressionism and Japanese art. Prints by Annie Bissett, Kristina Hagman, Ellen Heck, Tracy Lang, Eva Pietzcker and Roger Shimomura illustrate the ongoing allure of *ukiyo-e* as the basis for innovations in printmaking today.



IN 1891, AMERICAN ARTIST

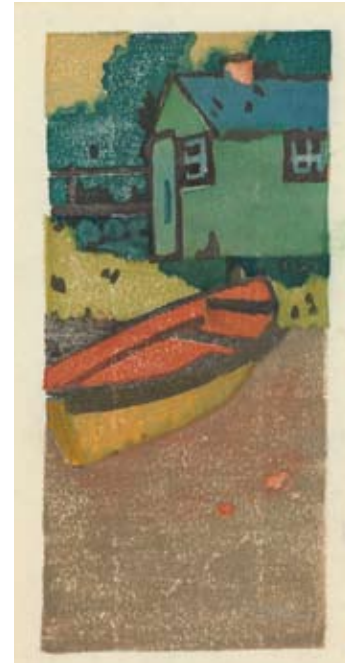
ARTHUR WESLEY DOW wrote that “one evening with Hokusai gave me more light on composition and decorative effect than years of study of pictures. I surely ought to compose in an entirely different manner.”¹ Dow wrote the letter after discovering a book of Japanese artist Katsushika Hokusai’s woodblock prints. The encounter was a defining moment in his career, shaping not only his own artistic output but that of numerous American printmakers who studied with him. The fascination with Japanese prints that Dow disseminated through his teachings and writings resonated again for artists in the late 20th century and continues today among contemporary artists who use the aesthetics of *ukiyo-e* (“pictures of the floating world”) as the basis for innovative works in printmaking.

Dow probably first encountered Japanese woodblock prints in the 1880s while studying in France where artists like Édouard Manet, Claude Monet, Paul Gauguin and Vincent Van Gogh were swept up in a wave of *japonisme*, a fascination with all things Japanese that sprang up following the opening of Japanese ports to foreign trade in the 1850s.² Japanese textiles, ceramics and furniture spread throughout Europe, but it was *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints that had the most profound effect on artists of the period. Japanese prints inspired new ideas about composition, color and subject matter that helped free artists from the strictures of academic art. *Ukiyo-e* prints later appealed to American artists, including Dow, for the same reason.

The *ukiyo-e* print had its origins in the early 1600s, nearly two centuries before it drew the attention of European artists. The growth of a wealthy merchant class provided a market for

woodblock prints that depicted the “floating world” of leisure and entertainment. Artists began depicting teahouses, festivals, theater and activities like the tea ceremony, flower arranging, painting, calligraphy and music. Landscapes, birds, flowers and scenes of daily life were also popular.

Certain compositional techniques defined the *ukiyo-e* aesthetic: flattened planes of color, asymmetry, truncated forms, the division of an image into sections through devices like windows, screens and walls, the use of strong diagonals and unusual perspectives. Bold colors and patterning were also common.³ **ANDO HIROSHIGE’s** *Uruga Port, Sagami Province, in Snow* (1840–42) reflects many of these tendencies: the asymmetry of the mountains, the simultaneous views down the hillside and out at the horizon, the diagonal sweep of water and the use of patterning to create the effect of softly falling snow. Artists also developed standard techniques for rendering human figures, often focusing on the details of hair and clothing while using stylized facial features, as in **UTAGAWA KUNIYOSHI’s**



Arthur Wesley Dow, *The Dory*, ca. 1895, color woodcut, collection of the Two Red Roses Foundation

Arthur Wesley Dow, *Marsh Creek*, 1905, color woodcut, collection of the Two Red Roses Foundation





Margaret Jordan Patterson, *Summer Clouds*, ca. 1918, color woodcut, collection of the Two Red Roses Foundation

Edna Boies Hopkins, *Garden Flowers*, ca. 1915, color woodcut, collection of the Two Red Roses Foundation

Poem by Sarumaru Tayû: Soga Hakoômaru (1847).

In *ukiyo-e* prints, Dow found an alternative to traditional academic techniques, which prized realism. He shared with Japanese artists a desire to use nature as artistic inspiration rather than something to be copied. Similarly, he drew inspiration from, but did not replicate, the work of Japanese artists.⁴ The landscapes and village scenes he made in Ipswich, Massachusetts, reflect his development of a style in which he synthesized line, color and *nōtan*, the Japanese concept of balance between light and dark. *The Dory*, made around 1895, features simple flat areas of contrasting colors punctuated by the diagonal placement of the boat, and its vertical format recalls that of long, narrow Japanese “pillar” prints. Dow often printed the same block multiple times using different colors to suggest a range of weather or seasons. Unlike Japanese

artists, he did his own carving and printing, applying ink to his block in a loose, painterly way.

Later prints reveal the impact of Dow’s 1903 trip to Japan, where he studied with painter Kano Tomonobu and with master printer Murata Shojiro.⁵ In *Marsh Creek* (1905) he manages to evoke the scene without fully describing it, paring the image down to its essential elements.

Dow was not only a prolific artist, but also an educator who shared his affinity for Japanese art with a generation of American art students, the most well-known of whom was Georgia O’Keeffe. In 1891, he founded the Ipswich Summer School, closely associated with the Arts & Crafts movement, which drew students from around the country.⁶ In New York he taught at Pratt Institute, the Art Students League and Teachers College at Columbia University. In 1899, he published *Composition: A Series of Exercises in Art Structure for the Use of Students and Teachers*, which revolutionized art education in the United States and went through 20 editions.⁷ It allowed Dow to share his ideas about the importance of line, color and *nōtan* with art students across the country.

Among Dow’s many students who went on to success as print-makers were **MARGARET JORDAN**



PATTERSON, Edna Boies Hopkins and Elizabeth Colborne. Born in Java, Indonesia, Patterson (1867–1950) was the daughter of a Maine sea captain and grew up in the Boston area. Although it's unclear whether she studied directly with Dow, she credited him as her teacher and was part of the same artistic circles in Boston.⁸ Like Dow, Patterson loved the New England landscape, which she depicted in prints like *Summer Clouds* (1918), and *Coast Cedars* (about 1915–20), using boldly contrasting colors, low vantage points and dynamic, asymmetrical compositions.

EDNA BOIES HOPKINS (1872–1937) began her studies at the Art Academy of Cincinnati before moving to New York to study with Dow in 1899. Through him she learned printmaking as well as an appreciation of Japanese art (she visited Japan on her 1904 honeymoon).⁹ Throughout her career she made prints like *Garden Flowers* (1915) that depicted plants and flowers in bright, colorful, asymmetrical compositions.

ELIZABETH COLBORNE (1885–1948) grew up in Bellingham, Washington, which she left in 1903 to study at Pratt with Dow and painter Walter Scott Perry.¹⁰ Colborne was most successful professionally as an illustrator for magazines and children's books, but throughout her career she made woodblock prints that reflected her deep connection to the landscape of the Pacific Northwest as well as her admiration for Japanese art. Her prints depicted the dense forests, mountains and lakes of western Washington, and sometimes the lumber industry in Bellingham. Images like *Mount Baker, Washington* (about 1928), illustrate the impact of Japanese printmaking on Colborne. Her careful balance of light and dark, building up forms through broad areas



Elizabeth Colborne, *Cedar Swamp*, ca. 1932, color woodcut, collection of the Two Red Roses Foundation



Frances Gearhart, *A Tatoosh Vista*, 1933,
color woodcut, the Jeri L. Wolfson Collection

Bertha Lum, *Junks, Trees and Mountains*
(or *Junks on a Lake*), 1922, color woodcut,
the Jeri L. Wolfson Collection



of color and creating depth through patterning, as well as the asymmetrical framing of the view through tree branches, suggest she absorbed critical compositional ideas from her studies of Japanese prints.

Colborne's work also reflects the particular affinity West Coast artists had for Dow's teaching and for Japanese art. A number of Dow's students found

teaching and design jobs in California, such as Pedro de Lemos, who taught printmaking and design for many years at Stanford University. Sisters May and Edna Gearhart were also originally from California and returned there after their studies with Dow. It is likely May who taught their third sister, Frances (1869–1958), the art of the woodcut, and of the three, it was Frances who

had most success with the medium.

FRANCES GEARHART closely followed *ukiyo-e* technique, including the use of a key block (a block of color, usually blue or black, that outlines the entire image and provides detail).¹¹ In *A Tatoosh Vista* (1933), she created a dramatic view of looming mountains from the floor of a valley in Mt. Rainier National Park.

Never a student of Dow, **BERTHA LUM** (1869–1954) learned of his ideas indirectly through his writings. She became fascinated with *ukiyo-e* printmaking and spent her 1903 honeymoon in Japan, where she found a printmaker who taught her the basics of the technique. She returned to Japan in 1907 and again in 1911. She spent the 1920s and 1930s living between the United States and China, where she continued to create prints with the help of carvers and printers.¹² Her woodblock print *Junks, Trees and Mountains* (1922) reflects her adoption of Japanese techniques and subject matter. Organizing the picture plane through receding blocks of color, she frames the lake behind a screen of cropped trees using a structure that recalls several prints by Hiroshige. The sloping mountains intersect with a line of boats as they sail across the lake in an elegant and atmospheric image.

British painter and printmaker **CHARLES BARTLETT** (1860–1940) was another artist drawn to *ukiyo-e*. Like Dow, Bartlett trained at Paris's Académie Julian. On a 1915 trip through Asia he met Watanabe Shozaburo, a prominent publisher who asked Bartlett to share his watercolors as the basis for woodblock prints. After settling in Hawaii in 1917, Bartlett continued to collaborate with Watanabe into the 1920s on prints like *Hawaiian Fisherman* (1919), which featured the flattened planes of color and stylized landscape elements common to *ukiyo-e* imagery.



Charles Bartlett, *Hawaiian Fisherman*, 1919, color woodcut, collection of Gary & Anne Borman

Decades later, another artist would take up the collaborative woodblock printmaking process that Bartlett and Watanabe pursued with entirely different results. **HELEN FRANKENTHALER** (1928–2011) is best known for her Abstract Expressionist color field paintings, large canvases stained with thin layers of paint. In 1973, she began the first in a series of collaborations with master printers at different presses in the United States and Japan.¹³ Although the connection between Frankenthaler's abstract woodcuts and traditional Japanese prints is not initially apparent, the artist was an admirer of *ukiyo-e* prints and owned a Hiroshige that inspired a painting, *For Hiroshige*.¹⁴ In prints like *Cedar Hill* (1983), Frankenthaler used layer upon layer of color and delicate line work to evoke the feeling of landscape, often incorporating the natural grain of the woodblock into the image itself. From 1995 to 1998, she made a suite of six prints, *Tales of Genji*, inspired by a classic Japanese literary work of the same name, which was a

Helen Frankenthaler, *Cedar Hill*, 1983, color woodcut, courtesy Greg Kucera Gallery, Seattle





Kristina Hagman, *Georgetown Autumn*, from *36 Views of Mt. Rainier*, 2010, color woodcut, courtesy the artist and Cullom Gallery, Seattle

popular subject among *ukiyo-e* artists. Printed using as many as fifty-three transparent inks on paper made to resemble the wood grain of the blocks, the prints have a painterly surface organized by a loose geometry, sometimes evoking landscapes or passageways. There is also a calligraphic quality to many of the marks in the *Tales of Genji*, as if the narrative of the story itself is embedded in the six woodcuts.

Frankenthaler's engagement with Japanese printmaking underlines the allure that *ukiyo-e* prints continue to exert on artists centuries after they were first made. Today a number of artists make innovative prints that use *ukiyo-e* printmaking as a point of departure.

Currently based in California, artist **KRISTINA HAGMAN** (b. 1958) spent many years in Seattle. Her series *36 Views of Mt. Rainier* was made in homage to Hokusai's famous *36 Views of*

Mt. Fuji. Like Hokusai, Hagman created different views of the mountain that is, for her, ever-changing yet a constant reminder of the powerful scale of nature in comparison to human activity. Each print frames Mt. Rainier behind a unique foreground, ranging from urban settings to natural idylls. The images feature classic *ukiyo-e* compositional techniques in the creation of prints that vary from highly detailed to nearly abstract, unified by the presence of the mountain in the background.

German artist **EVA PIETZCKER** (b. 1966) also makes prints that depict landscapes, but unlike Hagman, she does not allow urban life to intrude on the scenes she renders. Well-versed in the history of printmaking, she chooses to work in the Japanese style using water-based (rather than the more usual oil-based) inks because of the painterly results that emerge. She begins her process by making watercolor sketches on site, then takes these sketches into her studio where she carves them into blocks, marrying the spontaneity of sketching with the careful process of carving. She strikes a balance between describing landscapes and evoking them, using simple planes of color and calligraphic marks to build up her compositions. Although she is based in Berlin, Pietzcker has spent time working in Canada and the United States, including trips to the San Juan Islands and through central Washington. Prints she made after these trips, like *La Push* (2011), capture the vastness of the West, often focusing on unique geological features.

TRACY LANG (b. 1971) is drawn to woodcut for its ability to depict the essence of a thing rather than the thing itself. Based on Bainbridge Island, she makes large-scale woodcuts often measuring more than 7 x 7 ft. *Old Growth Tree Ring* and *Sweet Gum Seed Pod*, both 2011, evoke early *ukiyo-e* prints



in their monochromatic representation of their subject matter. Lang strips her images down to their basic elements, presenting them almost as silhouettes. *Season of the Cherry Blossom* (2011) comes out of a series she began before the 2011 tsunami on the coast of Japan. She started making large, simple prints of cherry blossoms. After the tsunami hit, the work took on a different tone as she began shredding books, maps and her own older work, collaging it into the prints to create mountains, coastlines, and surging, swirling patterns of water. The resulting prints are both a meditation on the history of *ukiyo-e* printmaking and a response to the tragedy of the tsunami.

Printmaker **ANNIE BISSETT** (b. 1955) has created several bodies of work that use *ukiyo-e* techniques and aesthetics to address issues with social relevance. A *Mayflower* descendant and a resident of New England, Bissett made *We Are Pilgrims*, 15 woodblock prints, between 2009 and 2010. As she writes, the prints are about “what it means to be American, who gets to be American and what our founders intended for the country.”¹⁵ Images like *With a Prosperous Wind* (a) convey the enormity of

the challenges the Pilgrims faced. Bissett uses a classic Japanese pillar print format, placing the Pilgrims’ ship at the bottom of the image both to make it seem small and to create a sense of the heavens watching over them. Made with 14 layers of ink, the sky above seems to shimmer with stars. Other prints from the series, like *Caleb and Joel Went to Harvard* and *Vast Unpeopled Lands*, contemplate the Pilgrims’ arrival from the point of view of the Native Americans. *American Bible Story* uses an erotic print by *ukiyo-e* artist Kitagawa Utamaro as the basis for commentary on the prevalence of Bible stories and references to the founding fathers in

Eva Pietzcker, *La Push*, 2011,
Japanese woodblock print,
courtesy the artist and Cullom Gallery, Seattle

Tracy Lang, *Old Growth Tree Ring*, 2011,
woodcut print on Kozo, courtesy the artist

Tracy Lang, *Sweet Gum Seed Pod*, 2011,
woodcut print on Kozo, courtesy the artist





Annie Bissett, *With a Prosperous Wind (a)*, 2008, Japanese woodblock print, courtesy the artist and Cullom Gallery, Seattle

Annie Bissett, *American Bible Story*, 2009, Japanese woodblock print, courtesy the artist and Cullom Gallery, Seattle



American political rhetoric, imagining an Edenic American creation story featuring early European settlers.

Like Bissett, artist **ROGER SHIMOMURA** (b. 1939) reinterprets *ukiyo-e* printmaking as part of a meditation on his personal history as well as larger social and historical issues. Born in Seattle, Shimomura and his family were forced into a Japanese American internment camp during World War II. He has created several bodies of work that address that experience, including *Mistaken Identities* (2005), a suite of six lithographs. Each lithograph is inspired by a well-known image of the camps from the period. Shimomura loosely borrows these earlier artworks' compositions, inserting figures taken from *ukiyo-e* prints in place of the original subjects.

ELLEN HECK's (b. 1983) connection to Japanese printmaking runs through the work of American Impressionist artist Mary Cassatt. Cassatt was so inspired by an 1890 exhibition of *ukiyo-e* prints that she created a set of 10 etchings she described as "an imitation of Japanese methods," intimate scenes of the lives of women featuring unusual viewpoints, flat areas of color, strong diagonals and an emphasis on pattern

and line.¹⁶ Heck took Cassatt's etchings as the inspiration for a set of prints she calls *Plus a Century*. Influenced by Cassatt's compositions and techniques, the prints consider how women's lives have changed over the last century and how they have remained the same. They combine woodcut with etching in a nod to Cassatt's medium as well as the Japanese prints that inspired her. *Place and Process*, a more recent body of woodcuts with drypoint, continues the ideas in *Plus a Century*. Showing women engaged in artistic and domestic work, images like *The Towels in the Window* and *The Light and the Letterpress* (both 2012) use the same flattened planes of color, patterning and cropping that Cassatt used to create her private views into women's lives.

When we tell the story of modernism, we often tend to create a linear narrative, in which European and American artistic styles evolved in a kind of vacuum, insulated from outside influences. Yet the real story has always been much more complicated, with webs of influence and exchange creating moments of artistic breakthrough. Japanese art, and *ukiyo-e* printmaking in particular, played an integral role in the development of modernism both in Europe and the United States, giving artists new ways of constructing pictures and understanding the relationship between art and nature. Today artists use the *ukiyo-e* tradition as a point of departure for investigations of larger ideas: the human relationship to the natural world, our history as an American people, the lives and work of women. A tradition that itself evolved over centuries continues to resonate in changing ways.

— Courtney Gilbert, PhD
Curator of Visual Arts



Roger Shimomura, *For Dorothea Lange*, from *Mistaken Identities*, 2005, lithograph, collection of Friesen Galleries at Northwest Nazarene University, image courtesy the artist and Greg Kucera Gallery, Seattle

Ellen Heck, *The Towels in the Window*, 2012, woodcut and drypoint, courtesy the artist and Davidson Galleries, Seattle

Ellen Heck, *The Light and the Letterpress*, 2012, woodcut and drypoint, courtesy the artist and Davidson Galleries, Seattle



1. Arthur Wesley Dow, quoted in Nancy E. Green, "Arthur Wesley Dow: His Art and His Influence," in *Arthur Wesley Dow (1857-1922): His Art and His Influence* (New York: Spanierman Gallery, LLC, 1999), 20.
2. Lionel Lambourne, *Japonisme: Cultural Crossings between Japan and the West* (New York & London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 2005), 7.
3. Karin Breuer, *Japanesque: The Japanese Print in the Era of Impressionism* (San Francisco: Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 2010), 21-49.
4. Green, 20.
5. Green, 27.
6. Green, 21.
7. Breuer, 111.
8. *Arthur Wesley Dow (1857-1922): His Art and His Influence*, 178.
9. Dominique H. Vasseur, *Edna Boies Hopkins: Strong in Character, Colorful in Expression* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2007), 1, 6.
10. David F. Martin, *Evergreen Muse: The Art of Elizabeth Colborne* (Bellingham, WA: Whatcom Museum, 2011), 13-23.
11. *Arthur Wesley Dow (1857-1922): His Art and His Influence*, 182.
12. Breuer, 124-125.
13. Ruth E. Fine, "Kathan Brown and Crown Point Press," in *Thirty-Five Years at Crown Point Press: Making Prints, Doing Art* (San Francisco and Washington, D.C.: Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco and National Gallery of Art, 1997), 22.
14. Roberta Smith, "Helen Frankenthaler: 'East and Beyond,'" *The New York Times*, Feb. 10, 2011.
15. www.anniebissett.com
16. Breuer, 77-78.



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Edna Boies Hopkins, *Indian Tomato*, ca. 1914,
color woodcut, collection of the
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Cover:
Elizabeth Colborne, *Mt. Baker, Washington*,
ca. 1928, color woodcut, collection of the Two
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