

KUNIYOSHI'S TRIPTYCHS IN THE COLLECTION OF THE NÁPRSTEK MUSEUM

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ABSTRACT: The Náprstek Museum of Asian, African and American Cultures keeps an extensive collection of Japanese woodblock prints *ukiyo-e*. The collection includes also the prints by Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1798–1861), one of the late Edo masters of *ukiyo-e*, especially famous for his warrior prints *musha-e*. The article focuses on only a part of Kuniyoshi's work – his triptychs. During his life Kuniyoshi designed more than 300 triptychs, the Náprstek Museum keeps 21 of them. The aim of this article is to provide an overview of prints in the collection, a description of their provenance, and an analysis of the motifs depicted on them.

KEYWORDS: Utagawa Kuniyoshi– Japanese woodblock printing – triptychs – *ukiyo-e* – *musha-e*

Life of Utagawa Kuniyoshi²

Utagawa Kuniyoshi is considered one of the last Edo masters of Japanese woodblock prints. His prints are marked by considerable innovation, whether the depiction of less common subjects, such as prints of warriors *musha-e*, or the use of a Western perspective. It was the *musha-e* prints that brought Kuniyoshi fame, as they responded to the wave of the popularity of stories depicted in Japanese literature and *kabuki* theatre, and later inspired other artists to design prints of warriors. His most famous series, '*The hundred and eight heroes of the Popular Suikoden*', or '*Stories of the true loyalty of the faithful retainers*', have been published many times in Western literature, but Kuniyoshi's triptychs, which also bore innovative elements and references to Japanese history and literature, have not yet been more comprehensively examined. The aim of this article is to provide an overview of the prints in the collections of the Náprstek Museum and to provide a deeper analysis of this part of Kuniyoshi's work. The article follows the work of former curator Libuše Boháčková (1927–1994), who published the complete collection of Kuniyoshi's prints in the museum's collection in an article in 1989. This article is limited to a specific segment – Kuniyoshi's triptychs, which will be published in colour. This allows for a more detailed evaluation, a deeper analysis of their motifs, and also a description of their provenance.

Utagawa Kuniyoshi was born on 1 January 1797 in Tokyo, then Edo, into a family of cloth dyers. His father's profession is often cited as one of the sources of inspiration in Kuniyoshi's work, a fact that some scholars believe is reflected in the details of his work, both in the emphasis on the depiction of clothing, which is evident not only in the prints of beauties wearing kimono, but also in the depiction of clothing and armour in the prints of warriors, and in the use of blue and its shades, best seen in Kuniyoshi's triptychs.³

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² As many detailed books about Kuniyoshi exist, this article will provide only with short summary of Kuniyoshi's life. For more detailed information about his life see Clark 2009; Forrer 2020.

³ Newland 1998, p. 10.

Not much is known about Kuniyoshi's childhood and early training; according to some, he was a gifted child who learned to draw by copying pictures from books. In around 1811, he became a pupil in the studio of Utagawa Toyokuni (1769–1825), the master of the *ukiyo-e*,⁴ and in 1814 he is recorded as having illustrated one of the woodblock printed book *gōkan*.⁵ The period from 1814 to 1827 is considered a setback in Kuniyoshi's career, when the artist was perhaps struggling to make a living.⁶ During this time, he illustrated books and published prints of beauties *bijin-ga*, but the real breakthrough in his career came in 1827 when he was commissioned to design a series of prints based on the then popular *Suikoden* (*Shuihu Zhuan*) book series.⁷

The success of the *Suikoden* series, in which Kuniyoshi designed the heroes of the novel with wild facial expressions, dressed in Chinese clothes, carrying exotic weapons,⁸ and adorned with tattoos,⁹ secured Kuniyoshi many more commissions.¹⁰ Between 1827 and 1863 he designed more than ninety series in the genre of the warriors *musha-e*, as well as prints of beauties, actors, and famous places. Perhaps the restrictions of the shogunate, where the Tenpō reforms (1841–1843)¹¹ forbade the depiction of actors and beauties, played a role in his success. These restrictions did not apply specifically to prints of warriors related to Japanese history. Woodblock artists circumvented the ban in various ways and many prints with historical themes were inspired by the *kabuki* plays and its actors, which buyers of the time could easily recognize. Another genre that developed under these circumstances was landscape painting. Although the Tenpō reforms also affected Kuniyoshi, the 1840s can be considered a very successful period in his career,¹² and Kuniyoshi's studio provided a training ground for his pupils such as Yoshitsuya (1822–1866), Yoshiiku (1833–1904), and, perhaps the most famous of the last woodblock artists, Yoshitoshi (1839–1892).¹³

In contrast, the second half of the 1850s marks Kuniyoshi's decline from fame. He designed fewer series of warriors, and the style of some of his prints also gives a less sophisticated impression. Yet, at the beginning of the 1850s, he designed some of his most remarkable triptychs. However, he was not afraid to use more foreign inspiration in his work, as seen in the series *Twenty-four*

⁴ *Ukiyo-e*, 'the pictures from the floating world', is a genre of Japanese art, associated with the woodblock prints and paintings.

⁵ Forrer 2020, p. 29.

⁶ An often-mentioned story describes how Kuniyoshi was forced to sell *tatami* mats and met another student from Toyokuni's studio, the then highly successful Kunisada, who was about to mock him, Newland, pp. 12–14.

⁷ One of the Four Classic Chinese Novels, known in the English as *The Water Margin*. The authorship is attributed to Shi Naian (1296–1372). The actual time of the work's composition is disputed academically, but the novel is dated before 1524. Translations into Japanese are dated 1757 and 1773, but it was the 1805 edition, written by Kyōkutei Bakin (1767–1848) and illustrated by Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849), that achieved the greatest popularity.

⁸ Robinson 2005, p. 237.

⁹ When depicting the heroes of *Suikoden*, Kuniyoshi designed fifteen heroes with tattoos, although in the original book only four of them are described to have tattoos, Thompson 2017, pp. 14–17.

¹⁰ The publication of the print was a complex process, independent of the author himself. It was the publisher who decided what would be printed, often in response to market demand. The author would be given a subject to work on and would produce a design for the print, which would be passed to the carver who would carve the wooden plate (depending on the number of colours used, the number of plates had to be cut). These plates were then used to make a test print, which had to be agreed by both the author and the publisher. Only then was the print submitted to the censors for approval, and if they approved it, it could be published. Until 1841 the prints were approved by the booksellers' guild and after the Tenpō reforms by a minor official of the shogunate. For more on the *ukiyo-e* trade, publication and censorship see Forrer 2004; Kornicki 2005, Thompson 2005.

¹¹ A series of reforms to solve Japan's economic problems. They are named after the Tenpō era (1830–1844) during which they were issued.

¹² Forrer 2020, p. 125.

¹³ Yoshitoshi's collection of woodblock prints in the Náprstek Museum was described in Gaudeková and Kraemerová 2012.

Selected Paragons of Filial Piety from 1854–1855, in which he depicted the elephants and people in foreign clothes.¹⁴ Events in Kuniyoshi's life also had an impact on his artistic output at this time. First, in 1855 he suffered a stroke from which he was unable to recover for a long time, and then in 1856 his wife died. Kuniyoshi died in April 1861 at the age of 63.

Kuniyoshi and his work have long been regarded among the Japanese experts in woodblock prints as inferior. A shift in the view of Kuniyoshi's work did not occur in Japan until the 1970s. However, Kuniyoshi was one of the most respected and popular artists of his time, and his influence had an impact not only on woodblock prints, where other artists began to depict warriors, partly because of the Tenpō reforms, but also in society, where tattooing became popular, inspired by his depictions of the *Suikoden* heroes.¹⁵

Kuniyoshi's prints in the Náprstek Museum collection

The Náprstek Museum has two hundred prints by Kuniyoshi of the *musha-e* genre in its collection. To a lesser extent there are also landscapes, depictions of beauties or sumo wrestlers, but these prints have not yet been studied and evaluated in detail.

The collection consists of 21 triptychs, of which 17 originate from two sources. The first is Josef 'Joe' Hloucha (1881–1957), a traveller, writer, and admirer of Japan. Approximately 7,000 objects from Japan, including over 3,000 prints, were acquired by the museum.¹⁶ Even today, Hloucha's *ukiyo-e* collection constitutes almost half of the entire collection of prints in the Náprstek Museum.

In the collection of Kuniyoshi's triptychs Hloucha is represented by ten prints (Inv. Nos. 38.836, 38.851, 38.853, 38.898, 38.903, 38.906, 38.908, 38.921, 38.922, 38.933). Although Hloucha collected woodblock prints, his collecting interest was often in acquiring the print regardless of authenticity, and his collection includes a number of reprints from old or recut plates. The print of the *oni*¹⁷ Shutendōji (Inv. No. 38.921), which differs from the version published in catalogues, may be an example of a later reprint.

In the 1990s, the collection was expanded by the purchase of seven triptychs (Inv. Nos. A18.913, A18.916, A18.918, A18.919, A18.922, A18.923, A18.928) from a private collector. According to the original documentation, they were part of a larger collection of 'J. Szikláy-Strnád', but it is not possible to tell from the museum's records who this person was, or how he or she acquired the prints. However, these are interesting prints in good condition, suggesting that the original owner was an experienced collector.

The remaining four prints come from various sources. One (Inv. No. A18.586) is from the collection of Karel Jan Hora (1881–1974), a Czech engineer, diplomat, and businessman. Born in Bílé Poličany, he worked briefly for the Post in Pardubice. In 1901 he left for the United States, where he worked in technical factories and studied engineering. Hora was interested in Japan

¹⁴ Tinios 2010, pp. 88–99.

¹⁵ Thompson 2017, pp. 13–15.

¹⁶ Hloucha was fascinated by Japan from an early age, visited the country on two occasions, and frequently incorporated themes from Japanese folk stories into his books. He was an avid collector, and in addition to Japanese objects, he also collected objects from China, South America, African art and European Gothic art. From the 1920s onwards, he engaged in negotiations with the Czechoslovak state regarding the potential purchase of his collection. Over the years, the Náprstek Museum purchased some of his objects, but the most significant outcome of these negotiations was the state agreement, which stipulated that the objects would become part of the Náprstek Museum's collection in exchange for a lifetime loan, Kraemerová and Šejbl 2007, pp. 47–49.

¹⁷ An *oni* is type of demon, ogre or troll, in Japanese mythology. They are described with superhuman strength, one or two horns on their head, and red, blue, yellow, or black skin. They can change their look to fool the victims.

from his youth, corresponded with the Czech travellers Enrique Stanko Vráz (1860–1932) and Josef Kořenský (1847–1938). He learned Japanese in the United States while working for a Japanese company and was sent to supervise the construction of a gasworks in Osaka. In Japan, he married Fuku Takemoto (1886–1965) and worked with another Czech resident in Japan, the architect Jan Letzel (1880–1925).¹⁸ Hora donated several prints to the museum, many of them being Kuniyoshi's *musha-e* from various series.¹⁹ Considering Hora's collection, it can be assumed that this was a subject of interest to him; Hora himself had translated the book *Bushido: the Soul of Japan* by Inazo Nitobe (1862–1933) into Czech in 1904.

The triptych (Inv. No. A16.611) bought through the shop Klenoty has the same design as Hora's print, with a note that the print came from Antonín Salač's²⁰ collection. Another print (Inv. No. A10.529) was also purchased through the Klenoty, but the original owner, who sold the print through the shop, is unknown. The last print (Inv. No. A16.835) comes from the collection of Sigismund Bouška (1867–1942), a Roman Catholic priest, poet, and translator.²¹ Bouška was not only a collector of the woodblock prints, but was considered their foremost expert, consulted by other distinguished collectors such as Julius Zeyer (1841–1901)²² and Joe Hloucha (1881–1957).

Kuniyoshi's triptychs in the Náprstek Museum collection (chronologically according to prints)

Kuniyoshi often designed diptychs and triptychs with themes of warriors and legends, numbering over 370.²³ The earliest of these prints, *Taira no Tomomori Borei no Zu* and a depiction of Minamoto Yorimitsu (948–1021)²⁴ fighting the spider demon, a popular subject he depicted several times in his prints, date from 1818, a time when Kuniyoshi had not yet reached his fame and was considered an artist just searching for his way to success.

***Chūshingura: gishi Ryōgoku-bashi hikitori no zu* [Pl. 1]²⁵**

(The loyal retainers of Chūshingura after crossing Ryōgoku bridge)

Inv. No. A 10.529

Signature: *'Ichiyūsai Kuniyoshi ga'*

Publisher: *'Kagaya Kichibei'*

Censorship seal: *'kiwame'*

The earliest triptych by Kuniyoshi in the Náprstek Museum collection is the print about *Chūshingura*. Between 1827 and 1830 Kuniyoshi designed five prints inspired by the famous story of the Forty-seven retainers and their efforts to avenge the death of their master, known in Japan as *Chūshingura*. The story is inspired by real events from 1701–1703. Asano Naganori

¹⁸ Jan Letzel (1880–1925) was a Czech architect and promoter of Czech-Japanese relations. He worked in Japan from 1907 to 1920 and designed several important buildings such as the Swedish and Russian embassies in Tokyo. His most well-known building is the Hiroshima Prefectural Industrial Promotion Hall, now known as the Atomic Dome or the *Genbaku Dome*, part of The Hiroshima Peace Memorial.

¹⁹ Boháčková 1989.

²⁰ Antonín Salač (1885–1960) was a professor of classical philology at the Charles University in Prague.

²¹ Bitnar 1932; Hánová 2019, pp. 104–139.

²² Julius Zeyer was a Czech writer and poet. He was a friend to the founder of the Náprstek Museum, Vojtěch Náprstek (1826–1894). He was also a collector, some of the oldest objects in the museum were purchased by him.

²³ Robinson 1982, pp. 169–184.

²⁴ Minamoto Yorimitsu, also known as Minamoto Raikō was a Japanese samurai, but also a hero of folk tales.

²⁵ Robinson 1982, T15.

(1667–1701), a *daimyō* from Akō,²⁶ is in conflict with Kira Yoshinaka (1641–1703), the shogunate's official, and is forced to commit suicide for breaking the rules. His retainers, determined to avenge their master's death, attacked Kira's mansion and killed him. Since they had violated the laws of the shogunate, they should have been sentenced to death as criminals, but at the same time, by avenging their master, they had fulfilled the samurai code of honour and were therefore allowed to commit ritual suicide. Shortly afterwards, their story was adapted for the Japanese puppet theatre *bunraku* and later for *kabuki*.²⁷ It is still one of the most performed *kabuki* plays. A print in the Náprstek Museum shows the warriors after they have completed their mission and crossed the Ryōgoku Bridge. It is a detailed print in which Kuniyoshi concentrated on capturing the characters of all the retainers, who gather mainly on the left and middle sheets, while on the right sheet one of them is being interrogated by an official. Though on the other prints²⁸ from this period the retainers are marked with the names from the *kabuki* play, this one is without the cartouches.

***Kuramayama no Zu* [Pl. 2]²⁹**

(Picture of Mount Kurama)

Inv. No. 38.853

Signature: 'Ichiyūsai Kuniyoshi ga'

Publisher: 'Ezakiya Tatsuzō'

Censorship seal: 'kiwame'

This print, published in 1832, depicts a scene from the life of one of Japan's most famous warriors, Minamoto Yoshitsune (1159–1189). The son of the head of the Minamoto family, Yoshitomo (1123–1160), and half-brother of the founder of the Kamakura shogunate (1185–1333), Minamoto Yoritomo (1147–1189), is one of Japan's most fabled heroes, and stories from his life have been depicted in Japanese literature such as *The Heike Monogatari*,³⁰ or the *Gikeiki*,³¹ and plays of the *noh* and *kabuki* theatre. The print shows the legendary story of Yoshitsune's youth. After the death of his father at the hands of the Taira clan, Yoshitsune was sent by his mother to be raised in a monastery in the mountains, where he was to learn swordsmanship from the *tengu*.³² A young Yoshitsune, still under his childhood name of Ushiwakamaru, is depicted with a wooden sword as he trains with the *tengu* under the watchful eye of their king. While the king is depicted as an old man with a large nose, similar to the folk masks of the goblins, the *tengu* themselves are depicted as anthropomorphic bird-like creatures, with bird-like wings and human arms in which they hold a sword, wearing *hakama* pants. The composition is very dynamic, showing Yoshitsune in motion, his feet bouncing off a tree. Kuniyoshi made a similar print in 1858, but it is more static. The king, still in the form of an old man, is this time dressed in the robes of a Buddhist monk, but the *tengu* are in pure bird form and the wooden weapons are held in their claws.

²⁶ Akō was a feudal domain in Japan, located in Honshu.

²⁷ *Kabuki* is a form of Japanese theatre, that originated in the 17th century.

²⁸ Görlich 2012, pp. 172–173.

²⁹ Robinson 1981, T20.

³⁰ *Heike Monogatari* (The Tale of the Heike) is an epic about a struggle between the Taira clan and Minamoto clan compiled prior to 1330.

³¹ The *Gikeiki* (The Chronicle of Yoshitsune) is a story from the 14th century about Yoshitsune and his followers.

³² The *tengu* are the legendary creatures in the Japanese legends. In some versions, they have a human appearance with long nose and wings (*konoha tengu*), in others they look more like a bird (*karasu tengu*).

Tenpō reforms marked the period between 1841 and 1843 to cope with the country's weak economic situation. The shogunate's censorship affected the entertainment districts, which were seen as a symbol of lavishness and moral degradation; the *kabuki* theatre was suppressed, and some genres of Japanese literature was also seen as inappropriate. The reforms also had an impact on the production of woodblock prints. Popular depictions of beauties and *kabuki* actors were banned, and each print had to be approved by the government. The censorship had a greater impact on Kuniyoshi's competitors who specialised more in prints of beauties and actors, although Kuniyoshi did not escape the shogunate's restrictions either.

***Kusunoki Masatsura Nagarakawa no Funabashi o kitta Ashikaga* [Pl. 3]³³**

(Kusunoki Masatsura and his troops crossing Nagarakawa over the bridge of boats)

Inv. No. A18.828

Signature: *'Ichiyūsai Kuniyoshi ga'*

Publisher: *'Ibaya Senzaburō'*

Censorship seal: *'Mura'*

Between 1839 and 1843, Kuniyoshi made mostly triptychs inspired by real historical events and military battles. The one of them depicts a scene from the Nanbokuchō period (1336–1392) in which the samurai Kusunoki Masatsura (1326–1348)³⁴ leads his troops across a pontoon bridge over the Nagara River. It is a beautiful example of Kuniyoshi's ability to combine sheets to create a whole image. A pontoon bridge passes through all three sheets, connecting the two banks of the Nagara River in an arc and giving the print a depth and linear perspective³⁵ inspired by Western works and rarely seen in the *ukiyo-e* genre.

However, the most common subjects of prints made during this period were those depicting the rivalry between the Taira and Minamoto clans. Both families, descendants from minor branches of the imperial family, vied for dominance in the imperial court towards the end of the Heian period (794–1185). Stories of their clashes were among the folk tales accompanied by the playing of the *biwa* lute and were later written into literature. As stories inspired by the history of Japan, they were not considered inappropriate for public morality; instead, they glorified the bravery and fighting spirit of the people of Japan. Between 1839 and 1843, Kuniyoshi designed approximately eighty prints, more than half of which (41 prints in all) focus specifically on the clashes between the Taira and Minamoto. There are three prints on this theme in the Náprstek Museum.

³³ Robinson 1981, T105.

³⁴ Kusunoki Masatsura was a son of Kusunoki Masashige (1294–1336), who supported emperor Go-Daigo (r. 1318–1339) and is seen as a symbol of loyalty.

³⁵ The woodblock printers sometimes worked with a western linear perspective, but this genre of prints *uki-e* was a minor. But in the first half of the 19th century some of the woodblock printers began to incorporate the Western-style perspective into their works, Hokusai often used it in his landscape prints.

***Heishōgoku Nyūdo wa-Shirakawa-tei no otoshige nite* [Pl. 4]³⁶**

(Taira Kiyomori, an illegitimate child of emperor Shirakawa)

Inv. No. 38.898

Signature: *'Ichiyūsai Kuniyoshi ga'*Publisher: *'Tsujiya Yasubei'*Censorship seal: *'Taka'*

The print portrays the head of the Taira family, Kiyomori (1118–1181), at the peak of his power in the Itsukushima Shrine. Dressed in rich courtly attire, Kiyomori dominates the central part of the triptych, and with a raised fan he beckons the sun not to set so that the shrine construction can continue. Kiyomori's power is confirmed by the presence of members of the imperial court in court dress. Cartouches:³⁷ The names of the depicted characters or the court ranks of their positions. The text describes the success of Taira Kiyomori and the story about his family background, where he was claimed as the illegitimate son of emperor Shirakawa and court lady from Gion.

***Kamakura sei Ōshū shinpatsu no zu* [Pl. 5]³⁸**

(Kamakura forces marching to Mutsu)

Inv. No. A16.835

Signature: *'Ichiyūsai Kuniyoshi ga'*Publisher: *'Jōshūya Kinzō'*Censorship seal: *'Hiro' (Fu)*

In a similar style, the second print shows Minamoto Yoritomo, on the right, dressed in armour and a helmet with horns, accompanied by his vassal on a campaign to the Mutsu province to put down his brother's rebellion. His vassals, dressed in armour, are depicted in detail and are marked with cartouches with their names.

***Chinzei Hachirō Tametomo Izu no Ōshima nite* [Pl. 6]³⁹**

(Chinzei Hachirō Tametomo at island Izu Ōshima)

Inv. Nos. A16.611, A18.586

Signature: *'Chōōrō Kuniyoshi ga'* (left and right sheet), *'Ichiyūsai Kuniyoshi ga'* (middle sheet)Publisher: *'Tsujioka Yasubei'*Blockcutter's mark: *'Sugawa Renkichi horikō'* (Carved by Sugawa Renkichi)Censorship seal: *'Hama'*

The third print shows Minamoto Tametomo (1139–1170), the legendary Japanese archer, heroically sinking an enemy ship with a single arrow. The triptych also shows Tametomo's lover with a naginata and his vassal watching the sinking boat. The waves crashing against the rocks, which are depicted on the right sheet, add a sense of movement and drama to the print.

³⁶ Robinson 1981, T83.³⁷ On the prints, the various cartouches can be found. Some of them are the signatures of the author, publisher or woodcutter. Others are part of the story depicted in the prints – mostly the court ranks or the real names of the depicted characters. Some prints also have a description of the event they depict. Due to the limited scope of the article, only shorter texts were translated. For longer texts this article will provide only short summary. Detailed translation of names and longer texts will be published in the prepared database.³⁸ Robinson 1981, T87.³⁹ Robinson 1981, T113.

Minamoto Yorimitsu-kō no yakata ni tsuchigumo yōkai o nasu no zu [Pl. 7]⁴⁰

(The Earth Spider Generates Monsters at the Mansion of Minamoto Raikō)

Inv. No. 38.851

Signature: 'Ichiyūsai Kuniyoshi ga'

Publisher: 'Ibaya Senzaburō'

One of the most interesting prints among Kuniyoshi's works is the one about Minamoto Yorimoto and the Earth Spider. Kuniyoshi's prints are often characterised by bold colours, but this one has a rather spare feel, with black, white, and dark green being the predominant colours, with occasional accents of colour on the clothing of Yorimitsu's retainers. Kuniyoshi used a motif he had worked on twice before, that of the hero Minamoto Yorimitsu and the spider demon Tsuchigumo. The spider demon manipulates Yorimitsu and fulfils his dreams with ghosts and demons. Among the demons are the most famous ghosts from the 19th-century Japanese literary *kaidan*⁴¹ stories, the long-necked *rokurokubi* demons, the ghostly lantern *chōchin-obake*, *tengu*, and many others. An extraordinary attention to detail can be seen in the details of the prints, such as the tiny date lines on Minamoto Yorimitsu's clothes or the depictions of the demons. Kuniyoshi used a similar composition of ghosts in *e-hon*⁴² *Wakan Eiyū gaden*.⁴³ The print was seen as a criticism of the shogunate, with the sleeping Yorimitsu as the shogun Ieyoshi (in office 1837–1853) and the spider demon as Mizuno Tadakuni, an official, who was one of the creators of the Tenpō reforms.⁴⁴ Yorimitsu's retainers are marked with the cartouche with their names and official posts. That also could be seen as the criticism. There are several versions of this print, as the print was banned by the shogunate, and the plates were destroyed. The versions differ in the placement of the signatures, in some of the versions, the author's signature appears only on the left side of the triptych, and in the choice of colours. Cartouches: The names of depicted characters: Minamoto Yorimitsu, Watanabe Tsuna, Sakata Kintoki (also known as Kintarō), Usui Sadamitsu, and Urabe Suetake.

Takeda Shingen Uesugi Kenshin to gogatsu jūgonichi ryōshō [Pl. 8]⁴⁵

(On the Fifteenth Day of the Fifth Month Takeda Shingen and Uesugi Kenshin Meet for Peace Talks)

Inv. No. A18.916

Signature: 'Ichiyūsai Kuniyoshi ga', *kiri* seal

Publisher: 'Sanoya Kihei'

Censorship seal: 'Mura'

For the next print in the Náprstek Museum collection Kuniyoshi returned to the historical theme. He depicted two legendary warlords and rivals from the Sengoku period (1467–1568), Takeda Shingen (1521–1573) and Uesugi Kenshin (1530–1578) in a triptych. Both were considered skilled military strategists and were seen by contemporaries as possible candidates for the unification of Japan in the mid-16th century, when the Ashikaga Shogunate was unable to keep the peace in the country. Between 1554 and 1563 they clashed in a series of bat-

⁴⁰ Robinson 1981, T128.

⁴¹ The *kaidan* refers to the ghost or horror stories popular during the 19th century.

⁴² *E-hon*, or *ehon*, are Japanese picture books. In this article this term refers to the woodblock printed illustrated books of the Edo period.

⁴³ Smithsonian Institution Archives. The Gerhard Pulverer Collection. Accession No.FSC-GR-780.722.1-2. pp. 46–47. Available at: [Wakan eiyū gaden | F|S Pulverer Collection \(si.edu\)](#) [Accessed 25 Nov. 2023] It has not been possible to date the book precisely, so it cannot be determined whether the first designed was a print or a book.

⁴⁴ Takeuchi, 1987, pp. 5–38.

⁴⁵ Robinson 1981, T136.

tles known as the Battles of Kawanakajima, an area between the Sai and Chikuma Rivers in Shinano Province. Takeda and Uesugi are pictured on opposite sides of the river. As with the other prints, the triptych forms a compact unit that would not work if divided into individual sheets. While Shingen's and Takeda's troops with their commanders are shown on the left and right sheets respectively, the centre sheet shows only the stream, that separates the two men, and a label with information about their encounter. The bend of the river and the positioning of the warriors at the top of the right panel and at the bottom of the left panel give the triptych the necessary perspective. Although depicted in a band of warriors, both Takeda Shingen and Uesugi Kenshin are similar to the more detailed prints made by Kuniyoshi, such as the series *Honchō Buyū Kagami* (Mirror of country's military elegance)⁴⁶ Cartouches: The names of the depicted characters – Takeda Shingen and Uesugi Kenshin, and the generals of their armies. In the middle sheet is a cartouche, which describes their meeting and the arrangements – both of them should dismount horse, sit to the table and bow to each other. Uesugi urged Takeda to dismount quickly and angered him by the rudeness.

***Sōma no furu-dairi ni Masakado no himegimi Takiyasha* [Pl. 9]⁴⁷**

(Princess Takiyasha, daughter of Masakado, in the old imperial palace in Sōma)

Inv. No. A18.919

Signature: *'Ichiyūsai Kuniyoshi ga', kiri seal*

Publisher: *'Hachi'*

Censorship seal: *'Watari'*

Another triptych also takes up themes from Japanese history and literature. The print tells the story of Taira Masakado's (d. 940) daughter Takiyasha. Masakado's story became the subject of several *gunki*⁴⁸ stories and was later adapted into *e-hon* novels. In 1836, the play *Shinobiyoru Koi wa Kusemono* was performed at the theatre in Edo (Tokyo).⁴⁹ The play tells the story of Takiyasha, who used black magic to avenge her father's death. Oya Tarō Mitsukuni, who has been sent to find the remaining rebels, injures the princess's servant by sitting on his sword, while the princess uses a spell to summon the demon *gashadokuro*⁵⁰ to help her. The triptych has been praised for its realistic depiction of skeletal anatomy, but the composition of the entire print cannot be overlooked. While the left sheet depicts the princess, the middle and right show Mitsukuni and the giant skeleton slowly emerging from the darkness behind him. The detail of the right hand slowly pulling back the curtains creates an almost spooky atmosphere. Cartouches: The names of princess Takiyasha and Ōya Tarō Mitsukuni. 'In the old imperial palace in Sōma, princess Takiyasha, daughter of Masakado, used the dark magic to gather allies. Ōya Tarō Mitsukuni came to investigate the demons and destroy them.'

⁴⁶ Kuniyoshi's series designed in 1845.

⁴⁷ Robinson 1981, T138.

⁴⁸ *Gunki monogatari*, or war tales, is a category of Japanese literature.

⁴⁹ Halford and Halford, 1979, pp. 278–279.

⁵⁰ The demon from the Japanese mythology. It takes a form of a skeleton made from skulls, but Kuniyoshi designed it only as the giant skeleton.

Taira no Kiyomori-kō wa sono senbushin yori idete [Pl. 10]⁵¹

(Taira Kiyomori, whose lineage originated from military retainers)

Inv. No. 38.836

Signed: 'Ichiyūsai Kuniyoshi ga', kiri seal

Publisher: 'Sugiya Seibei'

Censorship seal: 'Hama'

This print from 1844 shows Taira Kiyomori shortly before his death. The scene takes place in a palace room, dominated by a pair of folding screens painted in bright colours at the upper part of the print. Both screens are decorated with peony blossoms, which symbolise high status and luxury, and there is also a depiction of a carriage wheel, an emblem of the Heian aristocracy, to which Taira Kiyomori had risen by marrying his daughter to the emperor's son and thus becoming the grandfather of the emperor. On the second screen, almost in the middle of the triptych and above the figure of Kiyomori, a red mask for the Lion Dance stands out against the bright colours. The peonies also symbolise spring and refer to the death of Taira Kiyomori, who died in March. Kiyomori's death is described in the *Heike Monogatari* as an agony in which he was seized by a high fever that consumed his body and made him so hot that he could not swallow a drop of water,⁵² a punishment for his pride and cruelty. The print features members of his family and ladies of the court trying to calm him down, as suggested by their raised hands and worried expressions. His wife, wearing Buddhist robes, prays for his soul. Kiyomori himself, as in *Heike Monogatari*, is depicted in a feverish state, the sleeves of his robe fluttering around him as if he were in a frenzy. Kuniyoshi pays particular attention to his eyes, which are unusually large and swollen, red as if he sees the infernal flames that will consume his soul as punishment for his sins. Cartouches: The names and court ranks of the depicted characters. The text describes the dying of Taira Kiyomori, who was suffering by the 'fire sickness', surrounded by the high nobles, warriors, and his family members.

Kennin sannen Minamoto no Yoriie-kyō Fuji-no miten [Pl. 11]⁵³

(The third year of Kennin Minamoto Yoriie in Fujino Palace)

Inv. No. A18.918

Signed: 'Chōrō Kuniyoshi ga', 'Ichiyūsai Kuniyoshi ga', kiri seal

Publisher: 'Tsujiya Yasubei'

Censorship seal: 'Yoshimura'

The print shows Nitta Tadatsune (1167–1203) exploring a sacred cave on Mount Fuji, where he encountered Konohanasakuya, the goddess of Japanese volcanoes, flowers, and earthly life. The goddess, surrounded by a circle of light, is depicted in a light-coloured robe with a red *hakama* and flowing hair. The choice of light colours, which contrast with the dark background of the cave, emphasises her connection with the Shinto cult. Tadatsune, his hand drawing his sword, is shown with a stern expression on his face to express his courage, while his companions lie on the ground, unconscious or dead. The most impressive aspect of the triptych is the faithful depiction of a cave with stalactites and stalagmites, the monolithic nature of print is broken by a stream of water, associated with an 11th-century legend in which a goddess led a young boy to a stream that cured his mother of smallpox. Cartouche: The text describes the story of Nitta Tadatsune, who went to explore the cave of

⁵¹ Robinson 1981, T139.

⁵² *Příběh rodu Taira*, 1993, pp. 232–233.

⁵³ Robinson 1981, T 143.

Hitoana. The way through the cave, where he encountered bats and scary noises, lead him to the big river and at the other bank he saw the goddess Konohana with the dragon.

Nin-ō jūgō-dai Jingō Kōgō Santan Seibatsu [Pl. 12]⁵⁴

(The 15th Emperor and Empress Jingū attacks the Three Kingdoms)

Inv. No. A18.918

Signature: *'Ichiyūsai Kuniyoshi ga', kiri seal*

Publisher: *'Hei'*

Blockcutter's mark: *'horikō Kōkō Iwa'* (Carved by Kōkō Iwa)

Censorship seal: *'Hiro' (Fu)*

The subjects of most of Kuniyoshi's prints are inspired by Japanese history or stories, most of them are set in the Heian period or later. A notable exception is this print, meant to refer to the legendary Empress Jingū (201–269 CE), during whose reign Japan was to invade the Korean peninsula and conquer the kingdoms of Silla (57 BCE – 935 CE) and Baekche (18 BCE – 660 CE). Kuniyoshi's triptych portrays a foreign landscape with high mountains and a town upon which Japanese soldiers are trying to throw boulders. The impression of an exotic setting is enhanced using unusual shades of green, while the blue hills in the background emphasise the spaciousness of the scene. The soldiers are dressed in Edo period (1603–1868) armour and the military banners to the right of the print also have a modern feel. Although the title of the print suggests that it refers to the 3rd century CE, it depicts a much more recent military expedition. The warrior on the right is supposed to be Katō Kiyomasa (1562–1611), one of Hideyoshi's loyal vassals and one of the three leaders of the campaign to Korea. Katō Kiyomasa is depicted wearing a helmet shaped like *eboshi* hat, called an *eboshi kabuto*, and the back of his waistcoat bears his characteristic snake's eye emblem. The print is inspired by an illustration from the book *Ehon Taikōki*, which describes the life of Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537–1598).⁵⁵ The cartouches, which should have listed the names of the figures, have been left blank, presumably for fear of censorship.⁵⁶ Cartouches: 'The 15th Emperor, Empress Jingū, and the Inner Minister in the wise strategy to attack Three Korean Kingdoms.'

Chūko giyū, oji no adauchi [Pl. 13]⁵⁷

(Loyalty and courage, revenge for the uncle)

Inv. No. A18.913

Signature: *'Ichiyūsai Kuniyoshi ga'*

Publisher: *'Iseya Ichibei'*

Censorship seal: *'Hiro' (Fu)*

The print is based on the story of *Chūshingura*, where one of the Forty-seven *rōnin*, Horibe Yasube Taketsune, was renowned as an exceptional swordsman. The print depicts a scene where Taketsune avenges his uncle, who was lured away under the pretext of an honourable duel, and single-handedly defeats several attackers. His great swordsmanship earned him fame and he was

⁵⁴ Robinson 1981, T145.

⁵⁵ Toyotomi Hideyoshi was a Japanese samurai and feudal lord during the Sengoku period. Although of a common birth, he raised to the high position in Japan and is known as one of the three unifiers of Japan.

⁵⁶ In 1804, some woodblock artists, such as Kitagawa Utamaro (1753–1806), Utagawa Toyokuni (1769–1825), and Katsukawa Shun'ei (1762–1819), and their publishers were punished for depicting Toyotomi Hideyoshi on their prints, Davis 2007.

⁵⁷ Robinson 1981, T148.

adopted into the family of Horibe Yahei.⁵⁸ Several warriors are depicted on the print. Taketsune himself blocks a naginata attack with the sword in his right hand, while disarming another with his left, and still manages to evade another attack from behind. The print has a lively feel, and the positioning of the fighters shows a well-thought-out composition. All of this is accentuated by the colour scheme; the print is dominated by the bright, vivid colours of the surroundings, as seen in the trees and the sky, and the figures depicted, in this case the attackers and Taketsune's mother and sister. Taketsune, on the other hand, is depicted in a black kimono, and this contrast with the print makes his figure stand out and make a strong and striking impression.

Benkei ga Yūriki tawamure ni Miidera no tsurigane wo Eizan no Hikigauru no Zu [Pl. 14]⁵⁹
(Picture of Benkei's great strength, dragging off the great bell of Mii-dera to Mt. Hiei)

Inv. No. A18.922

Signature: *'Ichiyūsai Kuniyoshi ga', kiri seal*

Publisher: *'Ibaya Senzaburō'*

Censorship seal: *'Mura'*

Another print in which a large part of the composition is taken up by a single motif is based on Japanese stories about the monk Benkei (1155–1189). Benkei is a historically documented figure, he was one of Minamoto Yoshitsune's vassals, but he is also a popular protagonist of folk tales. Benkei is praised for his loyalty to Yoshitsune, but also for his courage and an immense strength. One folk tale describes how Benkei took the bell from the temple Mii-dera. The bell was famous for its incredible size, and Benkei wanted it to belong to the monastery Enryaku-ji, where he resided. One night he went to Mii-dera and stole the bell. However, the bell was not happy with its new location, and whenever the monks rang it, it would ring out that it wanted to return to Mii-dera. So, after some time, an angry Benkei dragged the bell to the top of Mount Hiei and rolled it back to Mii-dera.⁶⁰ The bell dominates the print, extending into all three sections, and the chosen colour transition plays an important role. Benkei, dragging the bell up the hill, is dressed in a black monk's robe, and his arms and legs are depicted with their muscles clenched to emphasise the immense strength he must have used to carry the bell away from Mii-dera.

Takeda Uesugi Kawanakajima daikassen no zu [Pl. 15]⁶¹

(The Great Battle of Kawanakajima between Takeda and Uesugi)

Inv. No. 38.933

Signature: *'Ichiyūsai Kuniyoshi ga'*

Publisher: *'Yamamotoya Heikichi'*

Censorship seal: *'Watari'*

The print returns to the theme of the historical clashes between Uesugi Kenshin and Takeda Shingen. It depicts the legendary and perhaps one of the most difficult battles of the Sengoku period, also known as the Fourth Battle of Kawanakajima in 1561, or the Battle of Hachimanbara. During the battle, the two warlords clashed when Uesugi Kenshin stormed the enemy's camp and attacked the surprised Takeda, who had no choice but to defend himself with an iron fan. The print depicts this legendary duel, with Takeda, in the centre of the print, deflecting a sword attack with an iron fan. Kenshin is depicted on a black horse. Kuniyoshi depicted

⁵⁸ Weinberg 2017, pp. 106–107.

⁵⁹ Robinson 1981, T150.

⁶⁰ Benneville 1910, p. 338.

⁶¹ Robinson 1981, T160.

horses in many of his prints, paying attention to details such as horseshoes, Japanese stirrups decorated with lacquer or realistic anatomical depictions of horses. In the background behind the two warlords and in the right part of the print, other clashes between soldiers or generals are depicted to emphasise the ferocity of the conflict.

***Inaba sanchū ni oite* [Pl. 16]⁶²**

(In the mountains of Inabayama) [Pl. 16]

Inv. No. 38.906

Signature: *'Ichiyūsai Kuniyoshi ga', kiri seal*

Publisher: *'Tsujiimaya'*

Censorship seal: *'Murata', 'Mera'*

Another interesting print is *Inaba sanchū ni oite*. This one is particularly attractive for its frontal depiction of Horio Yoshiharu (1542–1611) killing a giant boar. Yoshiharu served the part of the Oda family that opposed Oda Nobunaga (1534–1582). After this branch of the family was overthrown, he wandered the country as a *rōnin*. After hearing of his battle with the boar, Toyotomi Hideyoshi recruited him into his service. Yoshiharu is depicted standing, his hair and sleeves flowing, his arm outstretched, having just thrown a boar into a nearby stream. The expression on his face conveys both the courage and the stubbornness with which he faced the huge animal with his bare hands. It was his courage and strength that secured his future position. On the right are the warriors who witnessed this encounter and later spread rumours of his courage.

***Oda Harunaga-kō jo no hei hyakannen kuzure* [Pl. 17]⁶³**

(The Rebuilding of Oda Harunaga's castle wall)

Inv. No. 38.903

Signature: *'Ichiyūsai Kuniyoshi ga', kiri seal*

Publisher: *'Yamamotoya Heikichi'*

Censorship seal: *'Murata', 'Mera'*

The print from 1847 shows water again, this time a moat, behind which can be seen the castle base being repaired. At the bottom of the print is a *daimyō* on horseback and his vassal. Although this print is also inspired by real historical figures, the names have been changed for fear of censorship, although it was easy for contemporaries to recognise who was depicted in the print. Oda Harunaga, richly dressed and mounted on a horse with a searching look on his face, represents Oda Nobunaga, a prominent warlord of the Sengoku period, considered one of the three unifiers of Japan. Kneeling before him is Nakaura Sarukichirō, Nobunaga's vassal and later successor, in reality Toyotomi Hideyoshi. The scene depicting the repair of Kiyosu Castle was one of the occasions when Nobunaga took note of Hideyoshi's skills as an organiser, as he managed to repair the castle's fortifications in three days, as stated in the print's cartouche. The print is remarkable for its colour composition, which combines blue tones of the water in the moat and on the roofs of the towers with the castle buildings that appear among the trees. The prominent figures, in this case Harunaga, his entourage and Sarukichirō, are dressed in contrasting red so as not to be overshadowed by the dominance of the water and the castle. Both are dressed in the clothes with their actual family emblems, the quince for Nobunaga and the paulownia for Hideyoshi. Cartouches: The names of the depicted characters. The description of the story about the

⁶² Robinson 1981, T202.

⁶³ Robinson 1981, T204.

repair of the wall by the Surikichirō (Hideyoshi), who replaced Yamaguchi Kurōjirō, and how he completed the assignment in the three days.

Untitled print [Pl. 18]⁶⁴

Inv. No. 38.921

Signature: 'Ichiyūsai Kuniyoshi ga', *kiri* seal

Publisher: 'Amatsu'

Censorship seal: 'Watanabe', 'Mera'

In the other two prints, which are in the Náprstek Museum, Kuniyoshi returned to the composition of the dominant motif, which extends over all three sheets. In the case of the untitled print the dominant figure is the *oni* Shutendōji. The print is inspired by the story of the killing of this demon by Minamoto Yorimitsu and his vassals. This was a popular story that was recorded on a scroll as early as the 14th century and later elaborated in *e-hon* books. Minamoto Yorimitsu was sent to find out why people, especially young women, were disappearing around Kyoto. Kuniyoshi depicted Shutendōji in a semi-sleep state, with part of him already taking his true form, as seen in his right cheek and head, where the horn of the *oni* already appears, and his right hand with claws, while half of his body remains human. Shutendōji's partial transformation, including details such as the gradual change in the colour of his hair and the closed eyes on the verge of sleep, make this print one of Kuniyoshi's most impressive. However, the print in the Náprstek Museum collection differs from others published versions. In particular, the right hand, which takes on a demonic form, is dark in colour and has distinctive claws. In the Náprstek Museum print, it is shown with the hair, but the skin is of a normal colour. On Shutendōji's face there are two *hikimayu*⁶⁵-like spots on his forehead, and his kimono, which is only grey with a pattern, but in the Náprstek Museum collection is decorated with dark red circles. This is probably a different, later version of the print, given the poor quality of the application of some of the colours.

Sanuki no In kenzoku wo shite Tametomo wo sukuu zu [Pl. 19]⁶⁶

(The Former emperor from Sanuki sends his retainers to rescue Tametomo)

Inv. No. 38.908

Signature: 'Ichiyūsai Kuniyoshi ga', *kiri* seal

Publisher: 'Sumiyoshiya Masagorō'

Censorship seal: 'Mera', 'Watanabe'

The second print returns to the theme of the clashes between the Taira and Minamoto families. Hachiro Tametomo, better known as Minamoto Tametomo, a famous hero and an excellent archer, is a historical figure who fought on the side of the ex-emperor Sutoku (r. 1123–1142) during the Hōgen era riots. After his defeat, he was exiled to the Izu Islands but decided to escape and defeat the House of Taira. The print shows Tametomo's failed attempt to cross to Kyoto by boat, when a storm destroys his ship. Tametomo's wife throws herself into the waves in the hope that her sacrifice will calm the storm, while Tametomo is rescued by the *tengu* sent to his aid by Sutoku. The giant fish that unites the sheets then carries Tametomo's young son to safety on its back. The print shows signs of inspiration from the book *Chinsetsu yamiharizuki*

⁶⁴ Robinson 1981, T261.

⁶⁵ *Hikimayu* was a practice of removing the natural eyebrows and painting it higher on the foreheads. This custom was typical for the court nobles during the Heian period.

⁶⁶ Robinson 1981, T263.

by Kyōkutei Bakin, illustrated by Katsushika Hokusai.⁶⁷ The various scenes in the book, whether the shipwreck or the rescue of Tametomo's son, served as inspiration for Kuniyoshi and he combined them into a single print. Kuniyoshi selected a colour composition dominated by tones of blue, which appears not only in the depiction of the rough surface of the sea, but also in the clothing of the people depicted. The fish emerging from the waves are realistically rendered in muted grey-green tones. The ghostly *tengu* are colourless, with only hinted contours.

***Tsūzoku Sankoku Shi no uchi: Gentoku mitabi setchū ni Kōmei wo tazuneru zu* [Pl. 20]⁶⁸**

(Popular Romance of the Three Kingdom: Gentoku visit Kōmei three times)

Inv. No. 38.922

Signature: *'Ichiyūsai Kuniyoshi ga', kiri seal*

Publisher: *'Tsutaya Kichizō'*

Blockcutter's mark: *'Hori Shōji'* (Carved by Shōji) (middle sheet)

Censorship seal: *'Murata', 'Kinugasa', 'Fourth Ox'*

The last print in the collection is from 1853, when Kuniyoshi designed a series of triptychs inspired by the Chinese novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, which was popular in Japan and published as the *Ehon Tsūzoku Sangoku Shi* between 1836 and 1841, illustrated by Katsushika Taito II (1810–1853), a pupil of Hokusai. The woodblock print shows the famous scene of Liu Bei (161–223 CE) visiting the famous scholar and strategist Zhuge Liang (181–234 CE) at his home during a severe winter. During the first two visits, Zhuge Liang was not at home, so Liu Bei decided to come a third time. As Zhuge Liang was resting, Liu Bei and his men waited outside in the snowstorm for several hours. Kuniyoshi, who had illustrated several series of woodblock prints inspired by the popular *Suikoden* novel in Japan, also used common ways of depicting Chinese heroes here. Liu Bei and his men have full faces with beards and are dressed in long robes, but in this case hidden under straw cloaks against the snow and cold.

Symbols in Kuniyoshi's prints

The symbols and motifs in Kuniyoshi's prints are very interesting and can be found on several levels. The first is the main motif of the print, where Kuniyoshi mainly drew from literary stories and the history of Japan and to a lesser extent China.

As can be seen from his choice of themes, Kuniyoshi was very familiar with stories from Japanese mythology, literature, and theatre. As seen in the two prints in the Náprstek Museum collection, a print about Empress Jingu's campaign and the shipwreck of Minamoto Tametomo, he was also inspired by the work of other printmakers, as Kuniyoshi's prints, and these books are similar in many ways.⁶⁹ During his life, Kuniyoshi also designed various illustrated books, such as *Ishibayama Gihei no Shirahata* (1834), *Wakan Ishō Harimaze Byōbu* (1842), *Kyōku Hyakumidansu* (1845), and many others. He also illustrated *Yomihon Suikoden* (1829), which inspired his most famous work. But it was not just the *Suikoden* that was later reflected in his prints. In a number of Kuniyoshi's illustrated books we find motifs that he later elaborated in his prints. For example, in *Wakan Ishō Harimaze Byōbu* we can find the archer shooting at a boat with waves crushing around the rocks, or another motif often used in his prints – samurai on horseback crossing river. And it was not just the motif themselves. Kuniyoshi made use of larger printing

⁶⁷ Ōgaki 1991, p. 185.

⁶⁸ Robinson 1981, T294.

⁶⁹ Ōgaki 1991, pp. 184–185.

area and worked in detail with the landscape and use of colour to achieve a final dramatic result. He continued to develop his depiction of the faces of the characters. In many cases it is the vivid facial expression that add drama to the prints.

There are two main motifs in Kuniyoshi's work. The first was Japanese history, where he chose the actual events of historical figures as his subjects. In particular, the prints depict the clashes between the Taira and Minamoto families or the battles of the Sengoku period between Uesugi Kenshin and Takeda Shingen. These prints are very realistic, focusing on small details of armour, clothing or warriors' face, and are intended to refer to persons from Japanese history. The second was legendary events from Japanese stories and literature. These motifs also often have a historical basis and represent real characters, but the reality is distorted and adapted, often mainly based on folk tales and plays about these characters. These prints often depicted various supernatural creatures and demons, dominating entire triptych. By depicting ghosts and mythical creatures, Kuniyoshi responded to the public's interest in such motifs, which were very popular, particularly in literature, in the first half of the 19th century.

In addition to the main motif, there is a second line of symbols on the prints. These are often of a symbolic nature to emphasise the message of the print, mostly the symbolism of plants or animals (wild boar as a symbol of courage, peony as a symbol of prosperity). In many cases, these symbols referred to real historical figures. An example is the print of the real Kiyosu Castle, where the historical names were changed, but the characters wore the real emblems of Oda Nobunaga and Toyotomi Hideyoshi on their clothes.

Conclusion

Utagawa Kuniyoshi designed more than 300 triptychs during his artistic career. There are only 21 prints in the Náprstek Museum collection. The majority of these, sixteen prints, are from the period 1842–1850. Only two prints are from the earlier period of 1827–1832 and three from the early 1850s, but before Kuniyoshi's illness.

Although this is only a small part of Kuniyoshi's work, it is impossible not to notice the many innovative elements he used. These lay in the motifs he chose, although the influence of the publisher and the market cannot be ignored, and above all in how these themes were presented. It was not only the combination of all the sheets to form a final composition, for which he often used a dominant image, but also the use of colour and the whole colour composition or the work with perspective. In most of the triptychs, each sheet has its own main motif, often depicting an actor or a beauty, and together they form a complex image, but the individual sheet can also work on their own. This rule does not apply to some of Kuniyoshi's works. These are mainly prints that are united by a dominant motif that connects all three sheets. Nevertheless, even in these prints it is evident, that the individual sheet carries their own story. For example, in print 38.098, where the dominant motif is a giant fish, the right sheet works with the sacrifice of Tametomo's wife, the centre with the rescue of his son, and the left with the rescue of Tame-tomo himself. Kuniyoshi also did not hesitate to use various kinds of inspiration to emphasise the exotic nature of his prints.

Further research is needed to explore the wide range of symbols and motifs in his work and his use of different sources of inspiration.

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