

Collectors Talk – Mary Stewart 26 February 2009

Firstly I'd like to introduce John Lord and myself.

We have been collecting and studying Japanese prints for almost 25 years. Up until now it's been a very private passion. It was only when we discussed our collection with Kazari Collector and realized their interest that we even thought of mounting this exhibition and sale.

At the suggestion of Jo Maindonald we have chosen prints from our collection that cover all three major periods of Japanese print making –

Traditional (Ukiyo-e) prints

This is the period that covers some 200 years up until the 1890's and started with great masters such as Harunobu, Kiyonaga and Sharaku – their prints are now mostly found in museums or fine private collections. The period also includes masters such as Hokusai, Utamaru, Kunasada and Hiroshige as well as many others whose prints continue to circulate throughout the world today. Yoshitoshi was perhaps the last major artist of this period although recognition of his work is only more recent. Japanese print making then went into recession from the 1890's for almost twenty years.

The revivalist (Shin Hanga) movement

This movement started around 1916 to re-invigorate interest in Japanese print making and included new influences from western painting. Artists such as Hasui, Shinsui and Yoshida provide superb examples from this period. Importantly the publisher played a very crucial part in delivering the fine work and colour needed for this style of print. Publishers such as Watanabe were in high demand by the best artists and many emerging artists found it hard to secure publishers for their works.

Modern creative (Sosaku Hanga) movement

A number of creative artists started to experiment individually prior to the Second World War but it wasn't until after 1945 that it became a major movement. Unlike the previous movements where prints had been produced by the collective work of artist, cutter, and printer, these prints were conceived and executed by the artist themselves. Whilst using traditional materials such as wood, paper and water colour, they broke completely with the past in format, style and subject matter. As the creative spirit continued so too did experimentation with different media such as cloth, leaves, and any number of available items that provided colour and texture.

It is I think quite unusual to be able to view Japanese prints from all three periods together as most exhibitions tend to concentrate on one or other period alone. For those who are only familiar with the traditional Ukiyo-E print there is as you will see, so much more to explore and enjoy including some wonderful modern designs and creative prints. By viewing the three movements together you can see the common themes that flow through all periods and appreciate the technical excellence and artistry of each period.

Each period has a unique Japanese charm that grows on you. John and I often debate the merits of each period and who is the best artist and why. It is a continuing debate!

How did we start collecting? It all started in a second hand bookshop in Brunswick Street Fitzroy, Melbourne. By accident I picked up a book on modern Japanese prints, I couldn't believe what I saw and showed it to John. We bought the book, then a couple of months later bought our first print, then another, and another until we virtually had prints by every artist that appeared in the book. The book, which I have brought with me today, is titled 'Who's Who in Modern Japanese Prints' by Frances Blakemore and published by John Weatherill, Inc, of New York and Tokyo 1975. Incidentally 12 of the artists in this book are represented in this exhibition.

As time went on we bought more books and, as you will have guessed, more prints. We expanded into different periods and styles. Our knowledge grew exponentially. So did our reference library and our collection. We were hooked.

We visited exhibitions and galleries. Some highlights I recall include the Modern Boy, Modern Girl Exhibition at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1998 and the Floating World Exhibition here at our National Gallery of Victoria. I also visited the University of Sydney for a special exhibition of modern Japanese prints. I was privileged to be taken on a private tour of the works by the curator Pamela Bell.

Where did we collect from? Our collection started with local purchases mainly from auctions and galleries then extended interstate and overseas. As time went on we also got to know other collectors and this of course leads to buying and swapping. These days there is the internet but ultimately we still prefer to see the print in person or to buy from a known source.

What's so special about Japanese prints?

- They are unique, confronting, and beautiful and have wonderful style
- They distil complex emotions and situations into simple and quite often haunting imagery
- Whilst uniquely Japanese they have universal appeal and hence are collected throughout the world, notably Germany, America, France, England, Australia and of course Japan
- Japanese prints have influenced and inspired many major art movements such as the French Impressionists. Here in Australia well known artists such as Margaret Preston and Brett Whiteley were greatly influenced by Japanese print making
- Japanese prints are still relatively accessible to the private buyer in Australia although prices for some artists and their works have recently increased significantly
- Japanese prints are relatively easy to store, frame and display
- We have found that they are a wonderful conversation starter, as most people regardless of whether they are interested in art, can identify with them in some way.

As time has gone on, John and I have derived enormous pleasure from developing our collection. We hope you enjoy viewing this selection and we look forward to talking with you further this evening. A special thanks to Jo Maindonald, Robert Joyce, Tarun and the Kazari Team for hosting the exhibition and for their professional support, advice and encouragement.