



Amusements in the Garden (Oniwa asobi)

Utagawa Kuniyoshi

Not on display

Title/Description: Amusements in the Garden (Oniwa asobi)

Artist/Maker: Utagawa Kuniyoshi (Artist)

Born: 1847 approx - 1852 approx

Object Type: Graphics

Materials: Ink, Paper

Technique: Woodcut

Measurements: Support and image h. 352 x w. 510 mm

Inscription: Censor's seals

Accession Number: 41454

Historic Period: Edo period (AD 1600-1868)

Production Place: Asia, East Asia, Japan

School/Style: Utagawa School

Woodblock print artist Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1798-1861) and publisher Sōshūya Yohei issued this design as a triptych titled *Amusements in the Garden* (Oniwa asobi). Only two of the sheets from the left side of the triptych are in the Sainsbury Centre Collection. In addition to a publisher's seal, the prints bear two censor's seals belonging to Mera Ta'ichirō and Watanabe Gentarō. This seal combination indicates the print was approved in 1851. [1]

The incomplete design depicts four young women beneath a blossoming tree amusing themselves by the water's edge. In the left-hand sheet, two women peer into the vibrant blue and gesture towards the ripples, possibly having spotted a fish. Two women with fishing rods occupy the central sheet, and in the right-hand sheet (missing from the collection), two more women with fishing rods watch their companions. The right-hand sheet also carries the title cartouche for Kuniyoshi's design. [2]

Kuniyoshi was celebrated for his pictures of warriors (J. *musha-e*) and actor prints (J. *yakusha-e*), however this triptych demonstrates the artist's skill at drawing beauties (J. *bijinga*). 'Pictures of beauties' offered Edo's urban townspeople (J. *chōnin*) a glimpse of the latest textile designs.

Finely attired for the modest pastime of line fishing, the young women wear mid-19th century fashions contemporary with the date of the print. The flowing sleeves of their elegant *furisode* kimono, silken brocade sash belts, stylish lacquered hair and elaborate hairpins contrast with the rustic occupation of catching fish. The beauties are clearly relaxed and at play, enjoying the spring season.

Printed using six blocks, the colour blue dominates the design. It is possible that the yellow colour block has been omitted in the print-production process. However, it is also possible that the colour yellow has faded from the prints, giving the grass and water the same azure tone. The sash belt of the beauty in the central panel was probably once yellow, and the grass beneath her feet, green.

From the 1820s onwards, a European synthetic pigment known as Prussian blue (J. *bero ai*) became increasingly available in Japan. [3] First imported by Dutch and Chinese traders in the last half of the 18th century, *bero ai* did not immediately replace organic dyes, such as indigo or dayflower blue. [4] Before the widespread adoption of aniline dyes, printers depended on light-sensitive vegetable dyes that had a tendency to fade. Organic yellow was produced from arsenic sulfide (orpiment), iron oxide, or gum resin (gamboge). [5]

Vanessa Tothill, May 2020

[1] Andreas Marks, *Publishers of Japanese Woodblock Prints: A Compendium* (Leiden; Boston: Hotei Publishing, 2011), p. 479.

[2] The Kuniyoshi Project, Private Collection. The woodblock design was reprinted by Izumiya Ichibei, and postdates the triptych in the Sainsbury Centre Collection.

<http://www.kuniyoshiproject.com/Triptychs%20of%20beautiful%20women,%20Part%20IV.htm>
[accessed 19 May 2020]

[3] A precise date of 1829 is presented in Frederick Harris, *Ukiyo-e: The Art of the Japanese Print* (Osaka; North Clarendon, Vermont; Singapore: Tuttle Publishing, 2010), p. 106.

[4] Elizabeth West Fitzhugh, John Winter and Marco Leona, *Studies Using Scientific Methods: Pigments in Later Japanese Paintings*, Freer Gallery of Art Occasional Papers, New Series, vol. 1 (Washington, D.C: Smithsonian Institution, 2003), p. 20.

[5] West Fitzhugh, pp. 12-15.

Further Reading

Frederick Harris, *Ukiyo-e: The Art of the Japanese Print* (Osaka; North Clarendon, Vermont; Singapore: Tuttle Publishing, 2010)

Andreas Marks, *Publishers of Japanese Woodblock Prints: A Compendium* (Leiden; Boston: Hotei Publishing, 2011)

Donald H. Shively, 'Sumptuary Regulations and Status in Early Tokugawa Japan' *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, vol. 25 (1964-1965), pp. 123-64

Elizabeth West Fitzhugh, John Winter and Marco Leona, *Studies Using Scientific Methods: Pigments in Later Japanese Paintings*, Freer Gallery of Art Occasional Papers, New Series, vol. 1 (Washington, D.C: Smithsonian Institution, 2003)
