

# Collecting Old Japanese Woodblock Prints

## A Culture Obsessed With Kites

In addition to his extensive trove of contemporary and historic kites, Scott Skinner, president of the Drachen Foundation, has numerous kite-related collections----stamps, porcelains, paintings, books, monographs, photos, illustrations, pins. His easy favorite in these sub-categories is colorful, skillful Japanese prints of kites or kite-flying from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, of which he has compiled some 80 specimens.

The prints focus on the world of the kabuki theater and of the related *ukiyo-e* or “floating” world, the segment of society focused on pleasure. They were turned out by a culture obsessed with kites. The mania for kites at one period was so intense laws were passed to enforce restraint and encourage subdued behavior. Kiting and everything associated with it continued unabated.

Skinner found his first Japanese woodblock print in an antique store in Provincetown, Rhode Island, probably carried there by a Yankee trader two centuries before. “This opened my eyes,” he says, “and on my trips to Japan since, nearly every year, I have hunted for these collectibles. I know where the stores are and have rarely been shut out. Since a kite image is ordinarily not the favorite view of an artist, the print is relatively inexpensive, in the \$200 to \$400 range. If a spectacular image and the condition is good, the woodblock may sell for \$3,000 and up. These prints are pricey, but they *are* rare.”

Skinner also buys from dealers----there’s an excellent one in Munich for instance----who contact him and from catalogues from Japan. About half of his prints have kites themselves or kite-flying as the central image, the other half show kites as a backdrop. The collection includes a number of multiple images, diptichs and triptichs.

Although a print will be credited to a given artist, say Hiroshige, in fact, Skinner notes, numbers of people were involved in the production. The artist did a sketch, carvers translated the image to woodblocks, and publishers arranged for issuance of the poster. If the image proved popular, it was run off a second or third time. The prints were churned out in vast quantities, but being ephemeral tended to disappear just as quickly. Finding a print in mint condition, with its color undimmed by age, is the goal of all collectors.

Skinner notes he’s at the point where he is upgrading his holding of these woodblocks. If he finds an image in better condition than one he owns, he may buy it as a replacement, trading the old print to another collector or dealer. Although small, the market remains a lively one.

Any work of art that is popular is susceptible to forgery, as the art world has learned over the centuries, but Skinner feels modern day copying is not a problem in this particular realm of kite collectibles. He cites the scrupulous honesty of reputable Japanese antique dealers as one element in his trust.

Depictions of the Yakko kite are Skinner’s particular love. The face and garb typically depict a beloved kabuki actor and thus are often not prints of kite-flying at all. He also likes bird kite images, usually whimsical, often surreal. His favorite woodblock, though, shows an Edo kite store, complete with 20 different types of kites, materials for flying, the dealer, customers, and so on. It’s as good as a documentary photograph.

Because the prints are fragile, preservation remains a battle. Purists keep their kites in portfolios, to be examined periodically and briefly. Collectors wanting to enjoy their prints as display items hang them on the wall, but degradation of the image is a very real threat.

So as to share his collection of Japanese woodblocks with the public, Skinner had his collection professionally

photographed and allowed the Drachen Foundation to mount a traveling rental exhibition of large photocopies, with extensive text. The highly portable show of reproductions debuted at the Japanese garden of the Portland Art Museum last summer, in connection with a larger exhibition devoted to the Meiji period in Japan, and has been traveling since then. Because the images shown are copies and not originals, insurance and other security costs are low and the rental fee to museums wanting to exhibit the trove is low. Information on renting the exhibit is available from the Drachen Foundation's Web site.

Skinner notes that the woodblocks are visually wonderful because of their subject matter. "They make the generally austere art of Japan seem friendlier," he says.

"Kite images are obscure enough that they are a delightful discovery for those who have seen Japanese prints before. As a bonus, many are like documentary photographs, showing the interesting Japanese culture of the time."

Skinner says that one of his favorite themes is crashing kites---kites hurtling down to the ground, kites stuck in trees. Another theme is the depiction of women. "Kiting was basically an activity for male children in Japan, as the images show," he says. "But women are commonly in the scene too: they are the mothers or the other female care givers."

*Among the most popular kites in Japan were those with images of kabuki theater characters that embraced the poster-like ukiyo-e woodblock print colors and drawing style, as in this print by Yoshiharu dated 1864. (Only a small portion of the triptych is reproduced.) Wildly popular, kabuki was a must-see for citizens and visitors to the capital city of Edo, present-day Tokyo. The most frequented theater in Edo bore the name Kabuki-za. Built in 1660, it stands today and is as popular as ever. In addition to scenes from everyday life in pleasure quarters, ukiyo-e woodblock prints were joined by the most glamorous images in popular Japanese culture---entertainers and historical and mythological figures. These subjects are still popular today. Although the grimacing warrior portraits and lavish attire we still see depicted on traditional Japanese kites appear to be highly stylized, they are in fact fairly realistic renditions of the elaborate makeup and extravagant clothing worn by kabuki actors. Kitemaking as a business was good enough to support more than 100 kitemakers in 18<sup>th</sup> century Edo alone.*





*A popular and traditional kite shape of the Edo (Tokyo) region, the Yakkō kite here portrays a kabuki actor in full garb (center image of a triptych). The artist is Kochora. The actor is doing a dance (odori) poking fun at the self-important antics of the footman (yakkō), lowest ranked retainer of a feudal lord. A probable development of the kite is its natural dance on the wind, mimicking the yakkō-odori dance. The T-shape of the Yakkō may be the oldest kite shape in Japan. The pocketed wings and short tail are a stable flying platform that can depict not only human shapes but birds and insects as well. Typical Yakkō-dako kites are in the shape and character of the footman: head bowed, hapi coat over a bare chest, fringed shorts over bare legs.*



A large wan-wan kite decorated with lion and peony motifs, the Fukuroi kite is typically found today in the Tokushima prefecture. In the 1930s, the kite crazies (*tako-kichi*) of Naruto built the world's largest kite, an oval-shaped wan-wan that measured 24 meters (78 feet) across and weighed 2,500 kilograms (5,500 pounds). In the distance in this print by Hiroshige Ando (1826-1869) is a *Machijirushi* kite from Hamamatsu. Every year on Children's Day, May 5, teams from the 49 districts of Hamamatsu gather for giant kite battles. Teams include children playing trumpets and drums, teenage boys as runners with kite line, adult men to man the kite winch, and the most respected adults to bridle the kites and advise on their flying. Team tents around the huge flying fields house stacks of the large kites, one being flown for each new baby in the district.



*We see close ties between kites and male children in Japan in this print by Kunimasa IV from the late 1880s. The militaristic and patriotic spirit of the time is reflected in the military uniforms worn by the boys as they prepare to launch an Edo kite. Even the title of the print, “New Year’s Games to Win,” reflects the mood of the day: games to win and not games to play.*