

Edo Kite Prints as High Art

Color woodblock prints vibrantly convey the popular urban culture of 18th and 19th century Edo, now called Tokyo. In a book that brings together two of Edo's most colorful traditions, prints and kites, John Stevenson celebrates the charm and significance of the mass-produced, elegant broadsheets known as *ukiyo-e*. The term means "pictures of the floating world," a pun on a Buddhist concept of the fleeting world of desires that is, coincidentally but poetically, appropriate for a study of kites borne on the wind.

Edo artists experimented with woodblock printing techniques during the 18th century as kiteflying became increasingly popular. Each influenced the other: kitemakers copied woodblock print designs to decorate their creations of bamboo, cloth, and paper, and printers used images of kites in their designs.

The prints are products of Tokugawa Edo (1603-1867) and Meiji Tokyo (1868-1912). They record highlights of the Kabuki theater, brothels, and Sumo wrestling, enthusiastically presenting star actors and celebrity courtesans and vignettes of everyday life. These images capture for us the character of life as it was lived and imagined by the printmakers and kitefliers of Old Japan. It seems that everyone thrills to the sight of a kite straining upward into the sky, and woodblock prints are perhaps the most accessible form of traditional Japanese visual culture.

The prints are from the Scott Skinner Collection. Skinner, of Monument, Colorado, is president of the Drachen Foundation, of Seattle. Stevenson, the author of the volume, is a leading scholar in the field of Japanese prints. The 200-page, 10-by-12-inch book has 115 illustrations, 100 of them in color, with 14 foldouts. It was issued by the University of Washington Press. A cloth edition is available for \$50 plus handling with the Drachen Foundation serving as retail distributor. To order, contact the Foundation shop at www.drachen.org. For wholesale orders, contact the University of Washington Press at www.washington.edu/uwpress.

In its promotion blurb for the volume, the Press concludes: "Kite aficionados and lovers of Japanese art alike will be delighted by this study."



Flying kites on a windy day. The pole and ring may be a device to get more height or to avoid obstacles. These two pages come from an uncolored, anonymous woodblock-printed book dated about 1752.

Gary Hawkey

The ‘Why’ of Collecting Kite Prints

Editor’s note: Following is a reminiscence by the president of the Drachen Foundation.

By Scott Skinner

Ukiyo-e are woodblock prints made in Japan from the end of the 1700s to the early 1900s. They are pictures of the “floating world,” images of the pristine world of the imagination. They have become a pictorial record of 19th century Japan in a time before foreign intervention and before the camera. Each is a snapshot of a particular time, place, person, and even emotion. To explain my fascination with *ukiyo-e* is easy; my primary artistic influences have always been Japanese kites. American geometric patchwork is a natural graphic technique when so many of the traditional Japanese kite shapes are geometric. When I discovered that many traditional Japanese icons could also be translated into patchwork, my passion for Japanese imagery grew.

I had seen many pictures of *ukiyo-e* in the Japanese kite books that I looked at for inspiration and could tell that some included realistic renderings of kites. I assumed, correctly, that these *ukiyo-e* are comparatively rare – at least compared to those portraying sumo stars, famous warriors, and kabuki actors – but I made it a point, if ever in Japan, to look for examples. As luck would have it, I found my first kite *ukiyo-e* in the United States, at an event that would send me to Japan for the first time. In Newport, Rhode Island, at the then Blackships International Kite Festival, I finished second in both the judged and peoples’ choice competitions and was awarded a trip to Japan when the winner couldn’t travel. In wandering the shops in Newport, I came across a modest (not in price) Hokusai diptych that included a kite. I bought it and was immediately hooked.

As it turned out, I traveled to Japan twice in 1989 and with guidebook in hand I learned where the *ukiyo-e* happy hunting grounds were located. That first trip taught me what I have since seen on almost every trip: look at 100 prints, and maybe there will be one with kites, look at 1,000 prints and you might do no better. What looked like an expensive hobby really wasn’t, because of the rarity of the prey. I rarely found more than two prints on any one trip. The elusiveness of the prey just made the game more fun, not to mention how pleasurable it is to look at so many beautiful prints and not be even the least bit tempted by any except those with kites.

As my collection of prints grew, I started looking more closely at them and began to really appreciate their beauty. I could see that each told a story and it didn’t really matter to me what the specifics of that story was (Upon reading John Stevenson’s scholarship in *Japanese Kite Prints* about the details included in my prints I can now see how wrong I was to remain ignorant). The composition, the color, the relationships between people and their environments – all were interesting and beautiful. The bonus for me as a kite artist was to see traditional motifs and decoration that I might include in my own Japanese-inspired kites. I could also study unusual kite shapes and forgotten kite ideas buried in the detail of *ukiyo-e*.

I know how lucky I am to have traveled often to Japan and to have been able to afford many of the prints that I’ve collected. When John Stevenson agreed to write about these *ukiyo-e* it was a wonderful opportunity to share new knowledge with the international kite community and even to the Japanese kite community. With the popularity worldwide of Japanese kite shapes, the stories and details that John brings to the kite world are extraordinary. They make my collecting obsession an asset that can be shared with kitefliers and spread the richness of Japanese culture to many who might never experience it firsthand. Through it all I know that there will always be prints that I’ll never find, and that drives me to continue to look. I was recently told that if you could see the heart of a collector you’d see that it was on fire. That’s the heart that drives us all to find the next one.