

200-year-old Graffiti

The genius of a ‘gag print’ from early modern Japan



Storehouse of Treasured Goods: Scribblings on the Wall, Ichiyusai [Utagawa] Kuniyoshi, National Diet Library, Japan

If you thought graffiti was only a modern phenomenon, think again. The scratchy-looking portraits shown in this woodblock print, complete with ‘tagging’ in Japanese script, show that the visual vernacular of urban graffiti is by no means unique to us or our time.

Titled *Storehouse of Treasured Goods: Scribblings on the Wall*, this print was produced in the first half of the 19th century by one of **Japan’s best known woodblock print artists, Utagawa Kuniyoshi** (1797-1861). Kuniyoshi was active during the Edo period (1603-1868), a culturally rich time when warfare between samurai clans had subsided. The relative peace and affluence of the Edo period provided fertile ground for Japan’s nascent printmaking industry and popular entertainment such as **Kabuki** to flourish.

Edo history specialist **Dr Takeshi Moriyama**, from **Murdoch University**, has recently been researching comical woodblock prints known as *giga*, and Kuniyoshi’s *Storehouse* is one of his favourites in the genre. Says Moriyama, “The print is intriguing for three reasons. First, it gives us a window into what ‘street art’ may have looked like in 19th-century Japan. Second, the fluid and realistic rendering of the “scribblings” is remarkable, especially considering the work was printed from a hand-carved woodblock. And third, it represents an ingenious solution to a political and commercial problem.”

The problem, he explains, was this. Toward the mid-19th century, the Edo government effectively outlawed luxuries, which included woodblock prints of Kabuki actors. At the time, Kabuki was wildly popular. Its actors were the rock stars of the day, and actor prints were big business for woodblock print makers. The new laws posed a dilemma: how could print makers

continue to tap into the lucrative actor print market without raising the ire of government censors?

“This print,” says Moriyama, “is Kuniyoshi’s ingenious response to this problem. To the censors, it’s a picture of graffiti on a wall. To the print-buying public, it’s a picture of Kabuki actors—with the added cachet of subversiveness given the climate at the time. So the censors are happy, the public is happy, and Kuniyoshi continues to sell his prints. Everybody wins.”

Moriyama’s research into *giga* has opened his eyes to a wealth of stories that have received little attention in English-language scholarship to date. “A great number of studies have been done on ukiyo-e, and there is much lively discussion on erotic *shunga* prints, but work on *giga* in English is scarce.”

Moriyama is looking forward to sharing his findings on *giga*, including the story of Kuniyoshi’s innovative actor print, at **The Japan Foundation, Sydney** next week. Says **Dr Moriyama**, “There are so many questions we can ask about *giga* in Edo society. Who made, bought, loved or frowned at what, and why? *Giga* prints open up the story of one of the most exciting times in Japan’s past—a time when regular people began surpassing elites in their ability to shape Japan and its culture.”

Hear more from Moriyama at [“Giga Prints and Edo Society”](#), a public talk on woodblock prints and the culture of old Japan at **The Japan Foundation, Sydney**, October 16 (Friday), 6:30 – 7:30pm. For more information, visit www.jpff.org.au.

Event Details

Date:	October 16 (Friday), 2015
Time:	6:30pm - 7:30pm (Doors open 6pm)
Venue:	The Japan Foundation, Sydney Level 4, Central Park (Access via lifts) 28 Broadway, Chippendale NSW 2008
Entry:	Admission free. Bookings essential.
RSVP:	Online via www.jpff.org.au
Enquiries:	reception@jpff.org.au / (02) 8239 0055
Website:	www.jpff.org.au

ABOUT TAKESHI MORIYAMA

Dr Takeshi Moriyama is a senior lecturer in Japanese at Murdoch University, WA. He specialises in the history, culture and literature of early modern Japan, and his research projects look at cultural and social transformation and people's construction of their own lives, with a focus on the interactions between the centre and periphery of society. He has a keen interest in the popular literature, print culture and publishing industry of early modern Japan. Dr Moriyama is Fellow of the Asia Research Centre at Murdoch University in Perth, and is the author of *Crossing Boundaries in Tokugawa Society: Suzuki Bokushi, a Rural Elite Commoner* (2013).

ABOUT GIGA PRINTS

Giga (lit., 'funny pictures') flourished in the latter half of Japan's Edo period (1603-1868). *Giga* are cheeky, satirical woodblock prints which typically feature human and animal caricatures, and contain cultural references that would have been well known at the time. These prints appealed to common people, as they were affordable and often parodied upper-class society. Their often exaggerated composition and occasional use of panels and speech bubbles are echoed in modern manga. *Giga* were to Edo times what internet memes are to us today: shareable media dripping with cultural references, gags and parodies, and made by and for pop-culture savvy consumers who loved nothing more than a good laugh.

ABOUT UTAGAWA KUNIYOSHI

Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1797-1861) is a Japanese woodblock printmaker who was active toward the end of the Edo period (1603-1868). Like his contemporaries Katsushika Hokusai and Utagawa Hiroshige, Kuniyoshi is hailed as a luminary among Edo-period printmakers. An artist of extremes, he is as well-known for his cute and comical pictures of goldfish and cats as he is for his bold and dramatic warrior prints. Kuniyoshi was famously a cat lover, and cats often feature in his prints (including the one above).

ABOUT THE JAPAN FOUNDATION, SYDNEY

The Japan Foundation, Sydney is the Australian arm of the Japan Foundation, which was established by the Japanese government to promote cultural and intellectual exchange between Japan and other nations. It runs a diverse range of programs and events, including exhibitions, talk events, grant programs and Japanese language courses for all levels from beginner to advanced. The Japan Foundation was established in 1972 with a global network of 22 offices in 21 countries. The Australian office was founded in 1978.



For more information please see www.jpff.org.au or contact:

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