

Curiosities of hedonistic pleasures and tragedies of life have been prevalent throughout human history. Various cultures of the world have worked to express, in their own ways, the extravagance and eccentricity of society through artistic expression. Although it took long for many of these expressions to be accepted in the public realm, it was always curiosity and intrigue that eventually won over moral concern.

Nineteenth century Europe was, in large part, primarily concerned with historic graphic design styles and themes. Movements such as the Arts and Crafts and the Victorian Era developed traditional decorative elements of pattern and religious motifs in their designs. Typography also harked back to classical type faces and page structure. This focus on historicism described the interest of its time, but by the end of the century, a need for a new style of expression opened the door for modernism. New designers were beginning to cry for a break of tradition and mediocrity, and their salvation soon came by new means for freedom of speech, and new outlooks from Asian art.

As the twentieth century approached, modernism loomed over the horizon, and it was the Art Nouveau movement in France that sprang up to greet it. As the transitional style from historicism into the new era, Art Nouveau focused on innovative graphic design principles and production methods and was highly influenced by the new curious art exploding from the Far East – the Japanese ukiyo-e print.

Previous to this, Japan had been in a time of strict isolationism from the rest of the world. Due to earlier aggressive religious expansion of the Spanish and Portuguese, Japan was fearful of the destruction of its own deeply-rooted culture. In 1639, Japan closed its doors to nearly all outside trade. Only the Dutch and Chinese were allowed to maintain trading posts in the country, and even then trade of goods was very limited.

During this time, Japan was able to explore its own direction in art and graphic design, uninhibited from outside artistic and religious influence. Since the Chinese practiced the same beliefs, and the Dutch respectfully did not wish to convert them, Japanese artists and designers felt free to express their culture in purely their own style. This style became famously known as ukiyo-e, or “floating world pictures.”

The Edo Period in Japan (1600-1868) was a period of aristocratic rule. Wealthy merchants and samurai held power with their money, and spent it lavishly in the red light districts that flourished in major cities. These pleasure quarters became known as the ukiyo, “floating world.” Many artists of the time were influenced heavily by this culture, and the Geisha courtesans became the subject of paintings and woodblock prints; “it formed the hub of an entire popular culture, including fashion, literature, Kabuki theater, and graphic art” (Bornoff, 35).

Kitagawa Utamaro was one artist working in the ukiyo-e style. His works focused mainly on the female form. Elongated figures of relatively flat, simple color, stretched across plain backgrounds in often erotic poses. These women were depictions of perfect beauty and grace, full of power and vitality. In his portrait of a courtesan (fig. 1), long flowing lines of cloth accentuates the figure, and beautiful pattern enlivens her with texture. The dark outline around the face and clothing further accentuate the softness of the form, as well as separate it from the background.

Another print by Utamaro depicts several women in a bathing scene (fig. 2). Although a seemingly simple daily activity, this print is still filled with the eroticism of the pleasure quarters that Utamaro frequented. This print again uses flowing organic line and simple flat color to give the figures a beautiful softness and graceful presence.