



日本

GEISHA &  
SAMURAI

THE ART OF JAPAN

PIETRO GOBBI | ENZO BARTOLONE COLLECTION



CajaCanarias  
FUNDACIÓN



## AREA 1

### 1. **Ki, the Spirit of Things**

Thanks to its unique approach to nature and the interpenetration of the divine world in the natural, Japan has developed its own aesthetic expressions and originality. In the fields of art, literature, painting, sculpture, music and the tea ceremony, this approach to nature has given rise to a wealth of manifestations and inspired many concepts for expressing ways of interacting with it.

Silvia Vesco

## AREA 2

### 2. **Ukiyo-e: Pictures of the Floating World**

The unification of Japan, completed in the early 17th century, ushered in a long period of peace that spawned a new middle class. Excluded from circles of political power but financially prosperous, this bourgeoisie turned away from official culture and developed a new one: ukiyo, "the floating world".

In medieval Japan, ukiyo meant "this world of pain", the endless cycle of death and rebirth that could only be escaped by attaining enlightenment, a concept which the emerging middle class ironically translated as a homophone meaning "this floating world". Ukiyo eventually came to represent the hedonistic, fickle, changing values of the new bourgeois society.

[...] living only for the moment,  
 savouring the moon,  
 the snow, the cherry blossoms,  
 and the maple leaves, singing songs,  
 drinking sake, and diverting oneself just in floating  
 unconcerned by the prospect of imminent poverty,  
 buoyant and carefree,  
 like a gourd carried along  
 with the river current: this  
 is what we call  
 ukiyo...[...]  
 Asay Ryoï

Ukiyo Monogatari, "Tales of the Floating World", 1661

## 2.1 Ukiyo-e: Places

Edo, now called Tokyo, and the Kamigata region were the nerve centres of this new artistic language.

Ukiyo, essentially linked to the hedonistic values of the new society in these regions, glorified everything that embodied the spirit of the times. Ukiyo-e themes were as fickle as people's tastes and constantly changed to reflect current events and sentiments, a key factor in the demand for prints: what people could not obtain in real life, for whatever reason, they could enjoy in images.

In Edo, the motifs were as varied as the city's many faces: bijin-e and shunga, pictures of beautiful women and erotic prints; fukei-e and kachō-e, views of natural landscapes and prints of flowers and birds; musha-e, which depicted myths and warriors from the past; and mitate-e, allegories and parodies, among many other expressions.

In contrast, the themes of ukiyo prints of the Kamigata school focused almost exclusively on bunraku and kabuki theatre performers.

## 2.2. Ukiyo-e: Technique, Editions and Reprints

Ukiyo-e are woodblock prints, a relief printing technique of Chinese origin that dates back to the Han period (206 BC–AD 220). They were probably imported to Japan around the seventh century AD.

Unlike in the West, where prints are usually made by individual artists, Japanese ukiyo-e required the coordinated efforts of several people. This publishing process facilitated their distribution.

After sketching the drawing (shita-e) on a thin piece of paper, the artist gave it to the block cutter, who glued it face-down on a wood block and carved over it, leaving the parts to be printed in relief. This produced the master or key block (hanshishi).

The printer then created a set of fifteen key-block proofs (kyōgōzuri) in black on which the artist noted where the colours should go, one for each page.

Following the artist's instructions, the block cutter subsequently carved a block for each different colour. The key block was used first, printing the outlines of the drawing, then the colour blocks were applied, beginning with those that required greater precision and occupied smaller areas.

Inking was done with a pad or baren made of compacted paper discs, and the printing registration marks consisted of an L-shaped guide in the lower right corner known as a kento and a line along the upper left edge. Approximately two hundred copies a day could be printed using this system.

In the culture of the Edo period (1603–1868), initially only black sumi versions of ukiyo-e were distributed; later, in the early 18th century, hand-coloured sumi prints became available, first in red and orange and later in green, yellow and pink. Finally, in the mid-1700s, full-colour prints known as nishiki-e or “brocade pictures” appeared.

When a work sold well, it was reprinted. Towards the end of the Meiji period, copies of the most popular works by masters of the past were made by contemporary artists, using the same techniques and preserving the original atmosphere. Later, when Japan opened up to foreign markets, these copies were mass-produced and lost their charm, becoming cold, lifeless replicas.

Interestingly, ukiyo prints were also used to embellish objects for everyday use like hand fans, tablecloths, children’s games and other household items, a fact that underscores the popularity of this art form.

### 3. Bijin: The Vision of Women in Ukiyo

Bijin, which means “beautiful woman”, is a central figure in ukiyo-e. The female figure, represented repeatedly by ukiyo-e artists, was perfectly suited to capturing the essence of the new society, changing fashions, idealised beauty and sensuality, grace and opulence. These abundant visual depictions give us insight into the complex situation of women during this period of Japanese history.

Geisha were artists, dancers and instrumental musicians, not prostitutes. Poetically termed “butterflies of the night in Japan”, they were genuine professionals, sophisticated hostesses and entertainers and experts in the art of conversation. They performed in tea houses or aboard yakatabune, boats with cabins that sailed up and down the River Sumida, and, upon request, in the palaces of their noblest clients as well. They wore kimonos that were elegant but less luxurious and ostentatious than those of courtesans.

The oiran or high-ranking courtesan was the backbone of the pleasure quarters. She also had to be well-versed in poetry and other arts and know how to play a variety of musical instruments. A yūjo or woman of pleasure was a prostitute only in a certain sense, for she was paid with money, but money alone was not enough to secure her favours. The tayū was the highest-class courtesan, a woman capable of holding intelligent conversations and well-acquainted with court etiquette who could keep company with noblemen and distinguished personalities.

The gritty reality of this world was deliberately concealed and ignored to avoid spoiling the fun: a golden world in appearance only that idealised the beauty of life's pleasures, for which the courtesan paid a terrible price. Women became courtesans to support their elderly parents or secure loans, although they could also be abducted or sold into service: contracts of indenture were abusive, and they were expected to work night and day and perform whatever services the brothel required of them

### 3.1 Bijin: Textiles and Ornaments

The kimono—which means “thing to wear” or “thing for wearing on the shoulders”—is worn by both men and women and is the traditional Japanese costume. Western apparel is often complicated to make but easy to wear, whereas the opposite is true of the kimono.

Its construction is extremely simple, consisting of seven cloth panels that form a single piece; the complicated part is knowing how to wrap it around the body. The garment is held in place by the obi, a sash tied around the waist. Depending on how it is worn, a kimono can look elegant or sloppy, drab or smart.

Men wore ankle-length kimono, while women had kimono that touched the ground and were usually gathered in folds above the obi. This garment was accessorised with various elements that added to the complexity of the costume, especially in the case of women.

In ukiyo prints of bijin, kimono design is a fundamental element, not only because of its aesthetic quality but also because it emphasises those attributes assigned to the female gender. Kimono and ornamental details are also useful for understanding the role of women in the past, their social status and the history of fashion.

#### AREA 4

### 4. Noh and Kabuki Theatre

Noh is the term for the classical theatre of Japan, initially reserved only for the aristocracy. It emerged in the Muromachi period (1333–1573) as a consummate art form and is characterised by its radical simplicity. More than action on stage, it presents a subtle evocation of emotions that surpass the boundaries of the real. Noh combines puns and historical and literary allusions with stylised gestures and altered speech supported by choral and instrumental music.

It is performed by the *shite*, the lead actor who always wears a mask (a quasi-sacred element in this type of theatre), and the *waki*, a secondary character without a mask. The stage has no scenery or props and is only complemented by musicians playing flutes and drums to accompany the singing and rhythmic dances. On the right side of the stage, the chorus comments on the actors' actions and supports the narrative. Traditionally, the scenes were divided by comic interludes called *kyōgen*, literally "nonsensical speech", to relieve the tension of the preceding drama.

Another type of Japanese theatre was *kabuki*, a word that means "to deviate" or "to transgress". A product of the new *chōnin* culture, *kabuki* was a more popular version of the aristocratic, hieratic *noh* theatre. Its sources of inspiration were the extravagant displays of prostitutes and lowly female dancers and the defiance of the leaderless samurai or *ronin*. Its actors became genuine street heroes, and the genre soon developed into one of the most important artistic expressions of the Edo period.

*Kabuki* theatre was performed exclusively by men, and female roles were assigned to *onnagata*, actors specialised in playing women.

#### 4.1. A Great Theatrical Cycle: *Chūshingura*

The feudal lord of *Akō*, *Asano Naganori* (1667–1701), had to receive ambassadorial envoys sent from the imperial court to the shogun, and *Kira Yoshinaka* (1640–1703), a corrupt, libertine master of ceremonies, was sent to assist him with the complicated traditional court etiquette.

Upon failing to receive his expected reward, *Kira* publicly provoked *Asano* who, forgetting that they were in the shogun's castle, reacted by wounding him. That rash act cost him his life, for he was forced to commit *seppuku* (ritual Japanese suicide) and his estate and family were ruined.

Some of his samurai become *ronin* and, led by *Oishi Yoshio*, they decided to avenge their master's death. They concealed many of their weapons and pretended to lead spendthrift, vagabond lives in order to allay *Kira's* suspicions. On the night of 14 December 1702, the *ronin* attacked *Kira's* home and found him hiding in a storeroom. *Oishi* offered him the chance to commit suicide and atone for his misdeeds, but meeting only with obstinate silence, he beheaded him with the same weapon *Asano* had used to kill himself. The *ronin* took the cleaned and washed head to *Sengaku-ji* Temple and placed it there, along with the fateful sword, on *Asano's* tomb to honour his spirit.

Kira's murder put the shogun in a quandary. On the one hand, the ronin had only shown admirable loyalty to their lord, but on the other, they had violated the laws of public order. Even so, they were allowed to honourably commit seppuku and be buried near their master.

Their forty-seven graves in the garden of Sengaku-ji Temple in Edo (Tokyo) are still a pilgrimage site today.

The legend inspired several works of literature, and in 1748 the play *Kanadehon Chūshingura*, written by Takesada Izumo II, was performed at Osaka's Takemotoza Theatre. It is still being staged today (with a few less acts) and the story remains deeply moving. The forty-seven heroes were (and are) considered the purest embodiment of bushidō, the samurai's moral code.

#### AREA 5

### 5. **Musha: Warriors**

The musha was the tribal warrior and archetype of the solitary hero, a leader on the battlefield and an aesthete in peacetime. He was at once keeper of the peace and defender of aristocratic power.

Over the centuries, the musha became the samurai, "the one who serves": the heroic, mythical image of Japan's warrior tradition constructed from a blend of history and legend.

Samurai formed an exclusively military caste and followed a strict code of honour called bushidō, "the way of the warrior", whose most important precept was to fulfil their duty to the daimyo or feudal lord. The samurai's entire life was an expression of exquisite, absolute allegiance to their daimyo, even unto death, which explains why their emblem was the cherry blossom, a symbol of the transience and beauty of life.

Two centuries had passed since the last great battles for the unification of Japan, now ruled by the Tokugawa dynasty, but the memory of those heroic deeds lived on, fuelled by the nostalgia of the samurai, whose power was already waning, and by ordinary citizens who dreamt of adventure as they admired musha-e, prints featuring the greatest warriors and most important battles of Japanese history.

## AREA 6

## 6. The World of the Samurai

In Europe, the feudal man-at-arms, heavily armoured from head to toe, relied on the force of his blows or, if mounted on a steed, the impact of his charge to overcome the enemy. In contrast, the Japanese warrior, whether on foot or on horseback, has always valued his agility in combat over any protective gear that might restrict his freedom of movement.

This is reflected in the construction of old Japanese armour: its laminar structure of scales (*dō-maru*), the quality of the material and its relative thinness provided ample defence against light weapons, and less but still sufficient protection against direct attacks (pike thrusts or sword slashes), while ensuring the warrior remained nimble enough to fight.

The basic structure of this armour remained relatively unaltered over time, with only minor adaptations to suit changing combat tactics. However, with the advent of firearms in the 16th and 17th centuries, the samurai found it necessary to replace their traditional scale armour with heavier plate armour or *tosei-gusoku*.

## AREA 7

## 7. Kakemono

Another widespread medium that conveys the essence of Japanese culture is the *kakemono* ("hanging") or *kakejiku* ("hung scroll"), marked by sophisticated spatial balance and the constant quest to create harmonious objects.

The composition features a scene set inside a central square and surrounded by a decorative construction of silk or damask paper, creating harmonious combinations that are always based on the geometric proportions discovered through long and careful aesthetic research. As a general rule, the upper register is the same width as the square, the lower register is two-thirds its size, and the side panels are one-sixth as wide.

The scroll rods at the top and bottom are functional, but they also serve the aesthetic purpose of adding volume and keeping the hanging taut so that it is fully visible when unrolled.

## AREA 8

## 8. Flowers and Birds: Landscape

The kami or spirit of nature's creatures, which artists have always sought and attempted to capture, made flora and fauna favourite themes in Japanese art. They are always linked to Shintoist concepts, and their imagery strives to reflect the cosmic idea that embraces and animates all things, in keeping with the philosophy underlying Japanese beliefs.

The Chinese poet and painter Su Tung-P'o (1036–1101) wrote:

[The aspects of nature] possess an immutable form, and beyond that a fundamental expression which is practically inviolable. If this is not captured, the error is greater than if the outward form is not satisfactorily conveyed. In other words, what lies within the appearance of a tree, a rock [...] must have a more profound effect than the outward form.

Nature is therefore an expression of the passage of time through the endless cycle of changing seasons. It takes on a symbolic dimension that complements humanity in an allusive sense by personifying and reflecting human virtues and sentiments, whether positive or negative. The crane, pine tree and tortoise represent long life; the carp is a symbol of strength, courage and perseverance; the rooster signifies high esteem; and the scentless camellia flower is regarded as an ill omen because it loses the entire corolla rather than just its petals.

## AREA 9

## 9. From Interpretation to Reality: Vintage Photographs

The first Japanese photographers were undoubtedly fascinated by ukiyo pictures, as evidenced by their choice of themes, use of framing and colouring after printing. In fact, specialised painters coloured the photographs by hand to imitate the popular multicolour prints of woodblock artists.

Thus, although it replaced ukiyo-e to a large extent, photography became one of the principal means of preserving the new Japan for all eternity.



26 JANUARY | 20 MARCH 2021

▾ Espacio Cultural CajaCanarias  
de La Palma  
Plaza de España, 3  
Santa Cruz de La Palma

Timetable:

Monday - Friday:

10:00 -13:30 h. / 17:30 a 20:00 h.

Saturdays: 10:00 to 13:30 h.

Closed on Sundays and holidays.

+ info:

[www.cajacanarias.com](http://www.cajacanarias.com)



CajaCanarias  
FUNDACIÓN

