

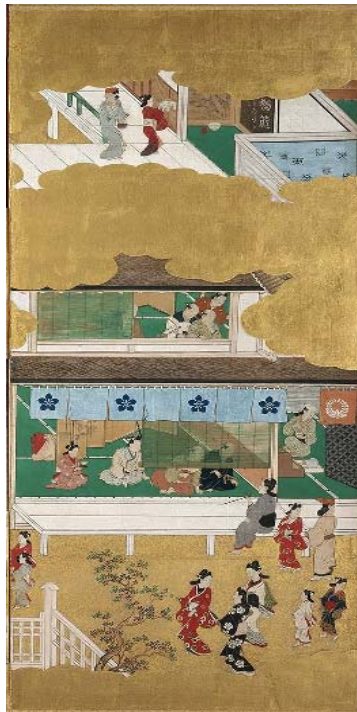


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**DRAMA AND DESIRE AT THE MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON,  
TO SHOWCASE “FLOATING WORLD” PAINTINGS OF EDO-PERIOD JAPAN**

**Exhibition Marks First Viewing in Boston in More than a Century  
of MFA’s Renowned *Ukiyo-e* Collection of Paintings**



Detail from  
*Scenes from the Yoshiwara Pleasure  
Quarter*, Edo Period (1684-94) by  
Hishikawa Moronobu

BOSTON, MA (July 16, 2007)—The “floating world” of the Kabuki theaters and high-class brothels of Japan's urban pleasure quarters was a place of fantasy, where drama and desire unfolded. It was out of this atmosphere that *ukiyo-e* painting was born during the late 17<sup>th</sup> century and continued to flourish until the end of the Edo period (1615–1868). These pictures of flamboyant actors, seductive courtesans, and beautiful geishas are the subject of a landmark exhibition organized by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (MFA), which includes 83 paintings from its extensive *ukiyo-e* collection; most have not been seen since first exhibited in Boston in 1892. The works of all major *ukiyo-e* masters—including Hokusai, Utamaro, and Hiroshige—will be showcased in screens, scrolls, banners, and theatrical signboards. Titled ***Drama and Desire: Japanese Paintings from the Floating World 1690-1850***, the exhibition derives its name from the “drama” and “desire” depicted in a pair of exquisite screens by Hishikawa Moronobu from the MFA’s Asian art collection, *Scenes from the Nakamura Kabuki Theater* and

*Scenes from the Yoshiwara Pleasure Quarter*. It opens August 28 and will run through

December 16, 2007, in the MFA's Torf Gallery. Official hotel sponsor is the Millennium Bostonian Hotel. The media sponsor is Classical 99.5 WCRB. Support for a symposium, "Arts of Japan: A Celebration," is provided by the Japan Foundation. *Ukiyo-e* paintings also are highlighted in a concurrent MFA exhibition that features ceramic and lacquer pieces, screens, scrolls, kimonos, and other textiles from one of the finest private collections outside of Japan. Titled *Arts of Japan: The John C. Weber Collection*, this exhibition will be on view at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, from September 22, 2007, through January 13, 2008.

Edo (modern-day Tokyo), which was founded in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century as a feudal military enclave by the shogun Tokugawa Ieyasu, was known as the "castle town under heaven." During the next 100 years, it developed into the country's major political and commercial center. By the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century, Edo was one of the largest cities in the world with more than one million inhabitants, but it was still very much a brutish, male-dominated society. To escape from the concerns and hardships of daily life and to suspend reality if only for a moment, the male residents of Edo would go to the many theaters in the city or travel to the Yoshiwara—a gated, licensed brothel district located on the outskirts. There they could engage in pleasurable pursuits, which included attending Kabuki theater and musical presentations, composing poetry as part of literary groups, and rendezvousing with courtesans at well-appointed houses of assignation (*ageya*). Artists of the period captured these moments on scrolls, screens, and theater signboards for connoisseurs to enjoy.

"The Museum of Fine Arts is fortunate to have in its possession the greatest collection in the world of *ukiyo-e* paintings, which we are now able to share with our visitors for the first time since they were initially acquired and brought to the United States in the late 1800s," said Malcolm Rogers, Ann and Graham Gund Director of the Museum of Fine Arts. "Thanks to the foresight of William Sturgis Bigelow, a Boston physician who lived in Japan and who donated most of these works to the Museum, we have the unique ability to introduce our visitors to the magic of the floating world."

Of the 35,000 estimated *ukiyo-e* paintings created in Edo-period Japan, only a small fraction are still in existence, and the Museum's holding of 700 paintings (from which the exhibition's 83 works are drawn) is the largest collection in the world. The credit goes to William Sturgis

Bigelow (1850–1926), a Harvard-educated doctor who became one of the first Americans to take up residence in Japan. While there, he collected tens of thousands of works in the 1880s, later donating his vast collection of Japanese art to the MFA, where he was a Trustee. In 1892, the *ukiyo-e* paintings by Hokusai were exhibited at the Museum, then all were placed in storage until the 1990s, when they became one of the focal points of a comprehensive 14-year survey of the more than 4,000 paintings, sculpture, textiles, masks, and lacquer works from the Museum's Japanese collection. The international team of scholars who came to Boston to study the *ukiyo-e* paintings with the MFA curators were astonished by the quantity and quality of the Museum's holdings; soon thereafter this rediscovery of rare works that had not been seen in more than a century made headlines in Japan.

The MFA's Asian art collection, in particular its Japanese works, is considered one of the most respected in the world, due in great measure to the efforts of Ernest Fenollosa, Okakura Kakuzō, and Edward Sylvester Morse (all of whom served as MFA curators), as well as Bigelow himself. In the late 19th century, they assembled a collection of Japanese art, both religious and secular, ranging from the eighth century to modern times. In addition to *ukiyo-e* prints (more than 40,000) and paintings, the Museum's holdings include a wide range of other genres of paintings, sculpture, ceramics, lacquerware, swords and fittings, kimonos, and other textiles. In 1999, the MFA furthered its Japanese connection with the opening of its sister museum, the Nagoya/Boston Museum of Fine Arts, in Japan.

“*Drama and Desire* presents an unparalleled opportunity for visitors to the MFA to engage with some of the most remarkable artistic achievements of the ‘floating world’,” commented Anne Nishimura Morse (William and Helen Pounds Curator of Japanese Art in the Department of Art of Asia, Oceania, and Africa). “Boston has the only collection in the world that includes paintings by all the major *ukiyo-e* artists. Unlike woodblock prints which were produced under the direction of a publisher, these paintings allow the viewer to come into direct contact with the hand of the artist.”

During the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, *ukiyo-e* developed from *fūzokuga*, genre paintings depicting the manners and customs of everyday life, and woodblock-printed book illustrations, under the leadership of Hishikawa Moronobu. While Moronobu and later *ukiyo-e* artists produced

woodblock prints for the mass market (which are most familiar to Westerners), they also created more exquisitely detailed paintings for higher-ranking, wealthy patrons. Unlike Western oil paintings, Japanese *ukiyo-e* paintings were executed on paper and silk using mineral pigments with a glue binder for paints, and carbon from soot for inks. Fragile and sensitive to light, they were not meant for permanent display. Screens and hanging scrolls were shown only at specific times of the year or to change a room's decoration. Handscrolls were treated as books to be brought out and enjoyed intimately, then put away. Because of their size and fragility, these handscrolls will be rotated midway through the length of the show.

*Drama and Desire* begins with the section **Early Ukiyo-e: 1690-1765** which highlights the “drama” and “desire” of theaters and brothels from the late 17<sup>th</sup> through mid 18<sup>th</sup> century as seen in a pair of six-panel folding screens by Hishikawa Moronobu titled *Scenes from the Nakamura Kabuki Theater* and *Scenes from the Yoshiwara Pleasure Quarter* (Edo period, 1684-94). In the right screen a lively troupe of actors (in male and female roles) wends its way across the stage to the accompaniment of a *samisen* and other instruments while additional vignettes show preparations backstage and barkers at the entrance corralling passersby to attend the performance. On the left, high-ranking courtesans and their retinues make their way down the main boulevard of the Yoshiwara while their clients await their arrival in well-appointed houses of assignation. Theater signboards, which were the posters of their times, also are displayed. All four of these boldly painted advertisements, with celebrated actors shown in dramatic poses from particular Kabuki plays, have been determined to date substantially earlier than any of those remaining in Japan.

*Drama and Desire* continues with a look at Japan's flourishing literary culture in the section **An Air of Innocence, 1765–1780: Suzuki Harunobu and his Contemporaries**. Collaborating with a group of witty amateur poets, Harunobu helped define an artistic environment that parodied older conventions of Japanese art, replacing images of Buddhist sages, gods, and famous warriors with scenes and figures from the pleasure quarters. Many of those living in the Edo period were well-educated, clever, and sophisticated, and were readily able to appreciate the poetry incorporated into a painting or the satire that might have been drawn of literary or historical figures. In the hanging scroll *Parody of Matsukaze and Murasame* by Katsukawa Shunshō (about 1783–1784), the artist provides a more contemporary version of the rustic salt-

brine maiden sisters from the traditional No play *Wind in the Pines*, now dressed in stylish 18<sup>th</sup>-century robes.

The third section of the exhibition, **Images of Feminine Allure, 1780-1805: Torii Kiyonaga and Kitagawa Utamaro**, is a study of classical beauty in painting. Earlier depictions by artists such as Harunobu show courtesans and geishas in a more child-like way whereas late 18<sup>th</sup>-century paintings by Kiyonaga present these women as tall, mature beauties. Representative of this style is *Two Women beneath a Willow Tree* (about 1785) by Kiyonaga, a hanging scroll in ink, color, and gold on silk, which shows the easy familiarity of two women—possibly mother and daughter—enjoying a summer evening under a willow tree near a stream. Kiyonaga influenced the work of Utamaro, who adopted the statuesque canon of proportions but imbued his female figures with an even more sensuous aesthetic. Also included in this third section is *Collection of Suggestive Pictures* by Katsukawa Shunchō (about 1781-1801), a handscroll which serves as one of three examples in the exhibition of erotic works known as *shunga*, or “spring pictures.” These free-spirited, risqué works of fantasy were produced by many of the leading *ukiyo-e* artists of the day, but because of Western sensibilities and censorship laws in modern-day Japan, they rarely have been publicly exhibited.

The fourth section of the exhibition, **Utagawa School, 1780-1850**, highlights a lineage of artists that dominated the production of *ukiyo-e* paintings and prints during the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The founder of this school, Utagawa Toyoharu, was a prolific painter in the 1780s and 1790s who developed his own distinctive style for depicting the female form, one that featured more ample and naturalistic proportions than previously had been used. Toyoharu’s disciple, Utagawa Toyokuni, followed his master's mode in describing beautiful women, but emphasized strong individual personalities in his portraits of actors. His hanging scroll of *Nakamura Utaemon III* presents the square-jawed, aquiline-nosed Kabuki theater superstar before his departure from the Edo stage in 1812. This portrait must have been commissioned by a patron distressed by that event; Utaemon added a poem of parting in the upper registers. The Utagawa school came to include more than 400 artists, among them Utagawa Hiroshige, well-known in the West for his poetic images of Edo and the *Fifty-three Stations of the Tōkaidō*, his acclaimed woodblock-print series.

The last section, **Katsushika Hokusai: *The Man Mad about Painting***, features the giant of *ukiyo-e* who constantly challenged himself to create in innovative ways during a 70-year career. Most familiar in the West for his print series *Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji*, Hokusai also experimented with paintings that featured the sensuous female form. He produced hundreds of works, and the MFA has one of the greatest collections of his paintings, among them the dramatic cotton banner depicting *Zhong Kui (Shōki) the Demon Queller*, which would have once flown aloft an Edo roof on Boys' Day, and the magnificent eight-panel folding screen (approximately 14" by 92") of a phoenix, executed in ink, color, cut gold leaf, and sprinkled gold on paper. The latter was placed around a pillow to keep out drafts, the mythical bird keeping a watchful eye on its surroundings. Also displayed, as though they were hanging, are two of Hokusai's lanterns, each of which depicts a dragon, representing the male principle, in confrontation with a tiger on one and a snake on another, representing the female principle. This yin and yang symbolism is dynamic, without beginning or end, as the creatures chase each other around the surfaces of the lanterns. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, these paintings were dismantled and flattened for preservation. Recently, their three-dimensional forms were restored by MFA conservators.

The exhibition concludes with works dating to the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the "floating world" slowly began to disappear as Japan was compelled to modernize as it opened to the West. The hanging scroll *Three Women Playing Musical Instruments* (about 1818-1844) shows an intimate circle of three women—a geisha, a teenage courtesan, and a young townswoman—engaged in playing the *samisen*, *koto*, and *kokyū*. The status of each woman is indicated by her dress and hairstyle. The artist of this remarkable painting was a woman—Katsushika Ōi, Hokusai's daughter. Always at her father's beck and call, she came to be known as Ōi, which means "come here." However, she was an accomplished artist in her own right, and Hokusai himself is quoted as saying, "When it comes to paintings of beauties, I can't compare with her—she's quite talented and expert in the technical aspects of painting."

#### **EXHIBITION ORGANIZATION/TOUR**

Organized by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, under the direction of Anne Nishimura Morse, *Drama and Desire* is a touring exhibition that will open in Boston at the MFA on August 28. It went on a three-city tour of Japan in 2006 at the Kobe City Museum, Nagoya/Boston Museum of

Fine Arts, and the Edo-Tokyo Museum. Earlier in 2007, it traveled to the Kimbell Art Museum then to the Royal Ontario Museum. Following its showing in Boston, *Drama and Desire* will be at the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco February 15 – May 4, 2008. The exhibition has been seen by more than 400,000 people to date and was enthusiastically received in Japan, where it was widely acclaimed in the press as the finest collection in the world of *ukiyo-e* paintings.

## **PUBLICATION**

Drama and Desire: Japanese Paintings from the Floating World 1690-1850, published by MFA Publications and edited by Anne Nishimura Morse, features essays and contributions by:

- Kobayashi Tadashi, Professor at Gakushūin University and Director of the Chiba City Museum of Art
- Howard Hibbett, Victor S. Koschmann Professor of Japanese Literature, Emeritus, at Harvard University
- Naitō Masato, former Chief Curator of the Idemitsu Museum of Art and Associate Professor at Keiō Gijuku University
- Asano Shūgō, Chief Curator of the Chiba City Museum of Art
- Tsuji Nobuo, Director of the Miho Museum and Professor Emeritus of the University of Tokyo

The 243-page book is available in both soft (\$37.50) and hardcover (\$55) at the MFA Bookstore and Shop, by visiting [www.mfa.org](http://www.mfa.org), or by calling MFA Publications at 617.369.4233.

## **PUBLIC PROGRAMS**

Programs designed to broaden a visitor's knowledge of the arts in Japan will be offered to complement the MFA's two related exhibitions, *Drama and Desire: Japanese Paintings from the Floating World 1690–1850* and *Arts of Japan: The John C. Weber Collection*, as well as its current exhibition, *Contemporary Outlook: Japan*, on view through February 10, 2008. They include a three-part lecture series in October, "Arts of the Floating World," offered as either morning or evening sessions; an all-day symposium on October 27, "Arts of Japan: A Celebration," supported by the Japan Foundation; and a lecture on November 18 by world-renowned architect Arata Isozaki on the Katsura Imperial Villa. For additional information about these programs, or to order tickets, please go to the Museum website at [www.mfa.org](http://www.mfa.org) or call the Remis Auditorium Box Office at 617.369.3306. (Please see related press release for more detailed information about programs.) An audio guide also will be available for the exhibition.

## **DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPHY**

Please contact Amelia Carignan at 617.369.3447 or [acarignan@mfa.org](mailto:acarignan@mfa.org).

*The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, is recognized for the quality and scope of its encyclopedic collection, which includes an estimated 450,000 objects. The Museum's collection is made up of: Art of the Americas; Art of Europe; Contemporary Art; Art of Asia, Oceania and Africa; Art of the Ancient World; Prints, Drawings, and Photographs; Textile and Fashion Arts; and Musical Instruments.*

*Open seven days a week, the MFA's hours are: Saturday through Tuesday, 10 a.m. – 4:45 p.m.; Wednesday – Friday, 10 a.m. – 9:45 p.m. General admission (which includes two visits in a 10-day period, but does not include Gund Gallery exhibitions) is \$17 for adults and \$15 for senior citizens and students age 18 and above. Students who are University Members are free. Admission is free for children 17 years of age and under during non-school hours. Admission also is free (except for Gund Gallery exhibitions) during Citizens Bank Foundation Wednesday Nights (4–9:45 p.m.); voluntary donations are welcome. The Museum is closed on New Year's Day, Patriots' Day, Independence Day, Thanksgiving, and Christmas. For general visitor information, visit the MFA website at [www.mfa.org](http://www.mfa.org) or call 617.267.9300.*

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