

Uke-e

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From the late Edo period to the early Meiji period, a large number of woodblock color prints called “uke-e” or “lucky paintings” based on ukemuke folklore, a superstitious belief that periods of good luck (uke) and periods of bad luck (muke) alternate in 12 year cycles. People could be divided into five categories based on their birth year : wood, fire, earth, water, and metal. Those in the wood category would embark on 7 years of good luck from the hour of the bird, on the day of the bird in the month of the bird in the year of the bird. The following five years would bring bad luck. Likewise, in every three years—the year of the rat (fire), the year of the rabbit (metal), and the year of the horse (earth and water)—people in some category would embark on a period of good luck, and there was a custom of giving people embarking on those periods of good luck gifts that started with the hiragana letter “fu”. Even cheap uke-e that depicted items that started with the “fu” were sold in mass quantities as gifts that would increase one’s fortune.

The ukemuke folklore can be traced back to Sui Dynasty China. It was passed down from ancient times in Japan as well, but it only prevailed among the common people in modern times. It was a popular subject of senryu verse in the late 18th century. A model woodblock color uke-e print from 1831 is now the oldest known, but such prints really began to be sold in 1849.

Uke-e prints portray large-headed good-luck dolls (fukusuke), the god of wealth (Fukurokuju), Mount Fuji, wisteria (fuji), an Adonis (fukujuso), and writing brushes (fude), but they represent a wide variety of ideas and compositions, and contain many original ideas of some of the most outstanding artists. Many pieces include a list of the dates and ages falling within the period of good luck (uke), as

well as poems that use the hiragana letter “fu”. Members of the Utagawa school of art, under the guidance of Kuniyoshi’s clan, an artist highly popular among the common people for the timely subjects of his pieces, were quite prolific artists.

Uke-e were printed every three years after 1849 until 1870. There was a temporary hiatus when the shift was made to the solar calendar, but soon thereafter the prints were revived, and printing can be confirmed until 1907. Surely the simple feelings of the deeply-spiritual Edo Period commoners continued on into the Meiji Period.

Changing perceptions of the Edo Seven Wonders

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I considered how, specifically, the “seven wonders” that were transmitted orally in places like Bancho, Azabu, and Honjo, were established. When Edo intellectuals collected seven wonders from their immediate surroundings from the Kansei Period (1789-1801), it became the start of the seven wonders tradition of Edo. They were the subjects of literature and ukiyoe prints. Some of the seven wonders were recorded as legends since the Meiji Period, but they were no longer seen as wonders by the people. The fact that the seven wonders were addressed in storytelling is confirmed by the existence of storytelling transcriptions.

Playing with Ghosts- 'Nanken Keredomo Bakemono Sugoroku'

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Literature confirms the existence of the game “esugoroku” (picture sugoroku) since the 15th Century. In the Edo Period, the game began being printed from woodblock, and gained wide popularity as a pastime of the common people. The game discussed in this essay, “Nanken Keredomo Bakemono Sugoroku” (painted by Sukegorokiyoharu Kondo, published in 1731, the 16th year of the reign of the Kyoho period), is believed to be one of the oldest among the existing sugoroku that were printed from woodblock for selling.

Many ghosts and ghouls are painted on this esugoroku, and an iconographic lineage for the paintings can be found by looking at picture scrolls of many ghosts that were in circulation from the Muromachi to the Edo Period. As is commonly known, picture scrolls are pictures painted by hand, and could only be viewed by a small number of people. For the various iconographic images painted on these picture scrolls to become firmly established as common visual icons, the existence of a media was crucial. “Nanken Keredomo Bakemono Sugoroku” is an example of how iconographic images, in this case “the shape and form of ghosts,” underwent the transition from picture scroll to publication. An analysis of esugoroku and how it became a well-known game among townspeople through the medium of publication shows us in part how iconographic images of ghosts, which originally were painted on a medium that could only be viewed by a few, could be shaped, established, and then passed down to today.