

Press Release

Kitagawa Utamaro

22 September – 14 November 2010

Ikon presents a survey of woodblock prints by 18th century Japanese artist Kitagawa Utamaro (d. 1806) from the collection of the British Museum. Co-curated by British artist Julian Opie and Timothy Clark (Head of the Japanese Section, British Museum), the exhibition mainly features images of women, in particular the courtesans of Yoshiwara, the regulated brothel district in Edo (modern Tokyo). The involvement of Opie in this project, an artist renowned for stylised portraits drawing on Japanese tradition, highlights the contemporary relevance of Utamaro's works.

There are very few certain biographical facts about Utamaro. Born probably in the mid-1750s in Edo, he was taught by Toriyama Sekien, a painter of the academic Kano school who became a popular illustrator and poet. The subsequent professional partnership between Utamaro and master publisher Tsutaya Jūzaburō was key to the rise of the young artist's reputation as a chronicler of the Yoshiwara district and, more generally, as a leading exponent of the *ukiyo-e* style. Pictures of Kabuki actors, beautiful people (*bijinga*), landscapes and city life were typical of *ukiyo-e*, and Utamaro's single-sheet colour woodblock prints of women are amongst the best known in a genre that now sits easily in the popular imagination worldwide.

Utamaro's images of the women of Yoshiwara, often conceived in series, functioned as sophisticated advertisements or guides to a world of sensual pleasure. Gestures, demeanour, clothing, accessories and the interior décor of the women's immediate surroundings - rather than their personal features - are scrutinised and described in accompanying calligraphy.

Utamaro's explicitly erotic works, so-called 'spring pictures' or *shunga*, were issued as albums of sheet prints and as illustrated books. They are unambiguous in their intention to titillate. Bodies in dishevelled states of undress assume a variety of positions, usually to reveal genitals portrayed in magnified meticulousness. Curious fingers, curling toes, looks of ecstasy and funny details all combine to convey the absurdity, wonder and necessity of sexual intercourse. The naked physical fact that lies at the heart of Utamaro's compositions, framed and foiled often by swathes of gorgeous fabrics worn by his protagonists, betrays the impulse that drives his work as a whole.

IKON

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Ikon Gallery is a registered charity no. 528892


A full illustrated catalogue is accompanies this exhibition, including an essay by Julie Nelson Davies, Associate Professor, Department of Art History, University of Pennsylvania.

The exhibition will be shown in the Mitsubishi Corporation Japanese Galleries at the British Museum from 16 February to 12 June 2011.

Ends.

Note to Editors:

1. Press Preview, Tuesday 21 September 2010, 12-8pm
2. Co-curator and artist Julian Opie (b. 1958) is known for his reductive formal language, drawing from influences as diverse as billboard signs, classical portraiture and Japanese woodblock prints. His work is exhibited at major museum collections worldwide, including MoMA (New York) and Tate Modern (London). His ethos that work should be available to everyone, everywhere leads to wide popular appeal. Opie is perhaps best known in the public imagination for his design of the compilation album *Blur: The Best Of* by British band Blur (2000). www.julianopie.com
3. Ikon is open Tuesday – Sunday and Bank Holiday Mondays, 11am - 6pm. Free entry.
4. Ikon Gallery is a registered charity and receives core funding from Birmingham City Council and Arts Council West Midlands.
5. A selection of images is shown below.
6. For more information and images please contact Helen Stallard, Press and PR Consultant, on 0774 033 9604 or h.stallard@ikon-gallery.co.uk

	<p>Kitagawa Utamaro</p> <p><i>Reflective Love</i>, from a series <i>Anthology of Poems: The Love Section</i> (c. 1793-4)</p> <p>Colour woodblock print</p> <p>©The Trustees of the British Museum</p>
	<p>Kitagawa Utamaro</p> <p><i>Hour of the Hare: Servant Women</i>, from a series <i>Customs of Beauties Around the Clock</i> (c.1798-9)</p> <p>Colour woodblock print</p> <p>©The Trustees of the British Museum</p>
	<p>Kitagawa Utamaro</p> <p><i>The Nakadaya tea-house</i> (c. 1794-5)</p> <p>Colour woodblock print</p> <p>©The Trustees of the British Museum</p>