An exhibition on the scale of UKIYO-E RELOADED is actually asking a great deal of the visitor: 600 objects can scarcely be taken in all at once. Nevertheless, we have had the temerity to take on this megaproject because we wanted to show the Japanese color woodcut from as many angles as possible.

The first concept was mooted in summer 2002; the initial idea of a large study room in which people can absorb the exhibits at their leisure in the end proved the most persistent. Its structure took shape in our minds as long tables on which to place the prints. The next step was the presentation in a system of thematic blocks: we would like to present the Japanese color woodcut so that we do justice both to its significance in its own era and to the place where it was created.

In addition to recent literature on Japanese popular and everyday culture, Walter Benjamin’s works on the mass media and mass culture proved to be an inspiring source of ideas. Whether comparisons with today’s mass media are permissible is an open question, but such associations helped us to understand and present the ukiyo-e as a phenomenon produced by a city of over a million inhabitants, as Edo indeed was at the time.

In old Japan the stars of theatre and the pleasure quarter — actors and beauties (bijin) — were popularized in color prints published in their thousands. They were thus the means of circulating an idea of stardom, similar to the way fashion and society magazines do today.

The seven sections of the exhibition took the shape of their own accord. The first section “Up To Date” addresses the color woodcut as a means of expression that constantly strives for technical and thematic innovation — also a characteristic of the mass media. The famous sights of the capital city itself and the population’s growing desire to travel are illustrated in the subsequent sections. The high level of education within the Japanese population was reflected in the ukiyo-e through its many treatments of the literature and history of China and Japan. These compositions are compiled in a separate section. The propagandist pictures of the late nineteenth century—controversial and even now charged with conflicting emotions — document at the end of the exhibition the end, too, of the Japanese color woodcut as popular culture: in the twentieth century, new techniques such as photography and rotogravures took over its role as a mass medium.

After the preliminary selection of objects, Michael Embacher and his assistants adopted our ideas and incorporated them in the traditional form of slanted locales such as are familiar from nineteenth-century graphic collections. However, the material — corrugated cardboard — alludes to the versatility of paper as raw material. This may be unusual in Europe, but in East Asian countries paper is used in a variety of ways: even clothes and furniture can be manufactured out of paper or cardboard.

In place of a comprehensive exhibition catalogue in book form, a CD/DVD was published and is now available, offering the viewer/reader the opportunity of research. All pictures are accompanied by detailed descriptions; furthermore there are biographies, an extensive bibliography on the topic of the ukiyo-e — all listed works can be seen in the MAK library — a glossary of Japanese technical terms, and databases to aid identification of artist signatures and publishers’ marks.

At the same time as the exhibition UKIYO-E RELOADED, the MAK is publishing its entire ukiyo-e collection of 4200 prints on the Internet page www.MAK.at. This is the most comprehensive Internet database on this topic in Europe at the present time. The titles are in three languages — German, English and Japanese/Romaji, so that research resources are accessible beyond the German-speaking area as well.

The years of work on the collection and the preparations for this exhibition were borne by the financial and personal resources of the MAK. We also received financial support from “The Japan Foundation”. We would like to express our thanks here to the former, to the Japanese Embassy in Austria, and to all the colleagues and assistants who worked on the project.
A Mirror Image Of Interests

On the history of the collection of Japanese color woodcuts in the MAK

Johannes Wieninger

Numbering around 4,200 sheets, the collection of Japanese woodcuts is one of the larger collection divisions in the MAK. Most of the prints came into the museum via private collections, and along greatly diverse paths before landing there.

Japan's part in this certainly made it easy for the West: the country's own tradition suffered a phase of scant regard after the end of shogun rule, so that too many objects arrived in the West at dumping prices, and were even given away. On the other hand, artistic development within the so-called western world was stagnating to a certain extent, bogged down with historicism and the repetition of exhausted styles. Here, the precise, colorful prints with their unconventional compositions and subjects were among the welcome sources of inspiration. Paper sheets, easy to handle, with no problems of transport or storage, became the ambassadors of a foreign culture. Japanese prints had long been inventoried in museums and collections, but were kept hidden from the public eye in the depots.*

The present-day ukiyo-e collection of the MAK started with the "k.u.k. (Imperial and Royal) Austrian-Hungarian Expedition to China, Siam and Japan" in 1869–1871. Its main objective being the commencement of diplomatic and economic relations with these countries. Among the relatively few surviving objects it brought back are two albums containing a total of 73 prints, for the most part by contemporary artists. Apart from Utagawa Kunisada I. (= Toyokuni III, 1786–1864), all the other artists were still alive: Hiroshige III (1843–1894), Kunisada II (= Toyokuni IV, 1823–1880), Kuniteru II (= Yamada Kunijiro, 1829–1874), Utagawa Yoshiku (1833–1904) and Utagawa Yoshitora (active ca. 1850–1880).

A second, smaller group – 23 so-called "crepe prints" – were inventoried after 1876, with the curious designation "glove leather, polychrome printed". These could also have originally come from the Vienna World Exposition of 1873, but in this case the description would have been more precise. Therefore I think it plausible that they were also brought back with the expedition; moreover, all the sheets were produced between 1863 and 1869.

These first sheets in the collection were regarded as "material samples" of contemporary Japanese arts and crafts, without any interest in artistic quality.

Despite large-scale presentations at world expositions and in museums, the Japan boom first took off in Europe after 1880. Official Japan – that is, government and

diplomatic missions – was not at all gratified that the ukiyo-e enjoyed such popularity, for the color woodcut was by no means the art genre it wished to see representing the image of Japan abroad. But the West was far more interested in the prints than in screens, lacquers and scroll pictures. Artists and the galleries connected to them were the ones to recognize and exploit this source of inspiration, organize exhibitions, and detect – or imagine they detected – a certain “spiritual affinity” in the Japanese pictures. Two dealers in things Japanese in Paris deserved especial credit for circulating Japanese prints.

Siegfried (Samuel) Bing (1838–1905), from a family of art and antique dealers, was so fascinated by his first trip to Japan in 1875 that he made it his life’s main task to spread Japanese arts and crafts abroad. His galleries in Paris became a source of inspiration for artists and museums; the periodical Le Japon Artistique he published as of 1888 in three languages was one means of disseminating a “Japan vogue” throughout Europe. In 1890, Bing was instrumental in organizing a major exhibition of Japanese woodcuts in the École des Beaux Arts.*

Hayashi Tadamasa (1863–1906) came to the 1878 World Exposition in Paris as an interpreter and translator – and remained until 1905.** He was one of the first to publish monographs on ukiyo-e artists. From 1885, along with his partner Wakai Kanensaburo (1834–1908), his was the top address outside Japan for best-quality woodcuts; in 1889 he finally went into business on his own.

Both Wakai and Hayashi added their name seals to the sheets they traded. The relationship of Bing and Hayashi must have been a friendly one, despite business rivalry. In order to popularize the Japanese woodcut, Bing supplied exhibitions outside France as well, hence his exhibition in 1895 in the famous “Hofkunsthandlung Ernst Arnold.” This was the first exhibition for selling works in the German-speaking world and was extremely successful, offering high quality and attracting directors of all the major museums, as newspapers reported.”***

The museum acquired two albums at this exhibition, one of which is among most important and best-quality objects in the collection: Kitao Masanobu’s complete series “Mirror of the new beauty competition of the courtesans of Yoshiwara and their handwriting (Collection of handwriting of courtesans from the green houses)” of 1784. This extraordinary album in superb condition was worth the princely sum of 200 marks for the museum (only two years later the Hamburg Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe acquired the complete edition for 60 marks from the Goncourt Collection in an auction – as a comparison: a sheet from the series “36 Views of Mount Fuji” by Hokusai cost only 2.5 marks!).

In 1897, Arthur von Scala (1846–1909) moved over from being the director of the Museum of Trade to the Museum of Art and Industry (today: MAK).* He recognized the significance of Japanese art for contemporary art and industry and in 1899 had already invited the art house of Ernst Arnold to put on an exhibition of Japanese color woodcuts in Vienna. Here the museum acquired single prints that were in every way equivalent to the first acquisition: among the 28 sheets there are five (one by Shuncho and four by Utamaro) with Hayashi’s stamp. The Arnold art-dealing establishment enjoyed excellent connections to Paris – works of the French impressionists were also included in its program – and it was most likely Siegfried Bing who maintained the contacts to Paris and to Hayashi.

We encounter S. Bing once more in 1901: the hitherto largest exhibition of Hokusai’s works took place in the Museum of Art and Industry, organized by the art dealers Hirschl & Co in Vienna 1, Plankengasse 7. 630 works were exhibited – paintings, prints, sketches and books. S. Bing was given a special mention in the foreword: “The Viennese public must thank two circumstances: it was possible to hold a ‘Special Hokusai Exhibition’ of such excellent visual presentation and gratifying scope first of all the kind support given by Mr. S. Bing in Paris, through his advice and provision of the works we needed.” The museum was host for this important exhibition, but an acquisition from it was not recorded.”**

The acquisitions from Arnold – over 200 sheets in all – and the great Hokusai exhibition demonstrated the important role the museum played in the international Japan trend, which from 1900 was gaining in significance also in Vienna.


** Hokusai’s works exhibited in the k.k. östl. Museum für Kunst und Industrie, exhibition catalogue 1901

* Gabriel Weissberg, Edwin Becker, Evelyne Possenn: L’art nouveau. La Maison Bing, exhibition catalogue Munich 2005

** Brigitte Koyama-Richard et al.: Correspondence adressée à Hayashi Tadamasa, Tokyo 2001

In 1902, Scala organized another, smaller exhibition "Kunst und Handwerk in Japan" (Arts and Crafts in Japan) before the entire museum had to be cleared in 1905 to make room for the major show "Ältere japanische Kunstdenkmäler" (Early Japanese Works of Art).

In overall charge of this large-scale exhibition was Heinrich von Siebold (1852–1908), who helped not only in composing the catalogue: the major part of the exhibits also came directly or indirectly from his collections. The exhibition was a factor which led to Scala’s taking over the Handelsmuseum (Museum of Trade), a project he successfully concluded in 1907.

It also gave Heinrich von Siebold the opportunity for a large-scale purchase action, including 500 ukiyo-e, single prints, also albums. There was a remarkable preponderance of the Utagawa School: 115 sheets were by Utagawa Kuniyoshi I (1769–1825), 174 prints by Utagawa Kunisada I (1786–1864) and 40 by Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1797–1861). Also notable the 55 color woodcuts by Kikugawa Eizan (1787–1867). The Siebold Collection, including 38 artists, manifested the great diversity of the ukiyo-e.

The second large group within this acquisition concerns the "Collection of woven, early Japanese textiles", which formed a separate part of the exhibition. Moritz Dregger, curator and internationally acknowledged textile expert at the museum, most probably forced this purchase; we can also assume he supported the acquisition of the ukiyo-e collection – after all, the fabric patterns reproduced in them were of great importance in textile expert.

In 1909, after Heinrich Siebold’s death, his comprehensive legacy was sold at "Au Mikado" in Vienna, although he actually wanted to distribute it among several European museums. The museum’s purchases included more than 300 prints, mainly by Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1797–1861) and Utagawa Kunisada I (= Toyokuni III, 1786–1864). Works by Aredo Hiroshige were also part of this legacy purchase, the rare, five known prints in broadside format from the unfinished series "54 Chapters of the History of Prince Genji" of 1852 in optimal print quality.**

The final takeover of the Museum of Trade in 1887 brought another 352 prints into the collection. Unfortunately the documents are lacking on details of their provenance. Yet again the Utagawa School dominated; another notable addition to the collection were the 30 triptychs of the Sino-Japanese War of 1894/95. Additional, smaller acquisitions – for instance the purchase of Gekko’s album of prints from the art dealers Fell fick in Vienna in 1903 – increased the museum collection about half of its present holdings by the outbreak of the First World War.

After 1918 and the end of the monarchy, the museum underwent a phase of reorientation: the step from a model collection to a historically oriented museum of the decorative arts was quickly taken, the planned reform of all museums, finally accomplished in the forties, was concluded with an exchange of objects within the state-controlled collections.*

After the death of the banker and economist Richard Lieben (1842–1919), in 1921 the museum received a very extensive endowment of Japanese prints and color woodcuts. In actual fact, 80 of 200 Edo-Period books and over 700 color woodcuts came from Richard Lieben’s collection. Two complete series from the endowment are among the most important of the present-day ukiyo-e collection: "The Chushingura Drama in Perspective Prints" by Toyokuni I (1769–1825), produced ca. 1790, and "Comparisons with the Ogura Anthology of the Hundred Poems by a Hundred Poets", a joint series by Kuniyoshi, Hiroshige and Kunisada from before 1850.**

By far the greatest enlargement of the ukiyo-e collection came to the museum through the so-called "Exner Collection". The complicated history of this acquisition cannot be told in detail, but an outline of its course is worth attempting.***

According to his own statements and those of his family, Anton Exner (1882–1952) traveled to East Asia fifteen times between 1906 and 1937. Success in sales after his first trip gave him the idea of starting an Asian trading business in Vienna. In 1911 he opened his first shop on Lichtenfelder Strasse. The enterprise soon flourished and was organized on a family basis. His son Walter Exner (1911–2003) spent the years from 1935 to 1937 in Peking/Beijing, on the one hand to study, but certainly as well

* On Heinrich Siebold’s collection: Johannes Wieninger: Japan Yesterday: Spuren und Objekte der Siebold-Reisen (Traces and objects of Siebold’s travels), Exhibition catalogue, Vienna 1997 and the references cited therein

** Brigitte Moser: Fünten Genji-Bilderd von Hiroshige, in: Minikorni, no. 68, Vienna 2004


** On the history and collections of the Lieben family: Fuku Evi, Gabriele Kohlbauer: Die Lieben. 150 Jahre Geschichte einer Wiener Familie, Exhibition catalogue, Vienna 2004


as an "agent" of the Exner company, to purchase trade goods and send them to Vienna. (During this stay in China, Walter Exner commissioned the creation of the collector's stamp "ai" [= love], which marks the majority of the ukiyo-e).

On Walter Exner's instigation, from 1935 onwards the family started to put aside pieces of museum quality, and purchased works with the objective of building up an East Asian collection. However, the family had already stepped into the spotlight prior to this, with loans for exhibitions on Asian art; the "Ostasiatische Kunst" exhibition at the present-day MAK in 1922, the "Ausstellung ostasiatischer Gerätekunst und Kleinfünder" (Exhibition of East Asian utensil art and small pictures), also at the same venue in 1928 – this exhibition used the term "Exner Collection" for the first time; also in the Albertina in 1932 in the "Ausstellung ostasiatischer Malerei und Grafik (painting and graphics) 12.–19. Jahrhundert" and in 1938 "Schnitzmeister des japanischen Holzschnitts" (Late masters of the Japanese woodcut).

Besides his activities as a dealer and collector, Anton Exner was also an expert on Asian crafts and house specialist in the Dorotheum auction house. He occupied this post also during the Nazi era and hence incurred suspicion of having activity taken part in the regime confiscations.

After German troops marched into Austria in March 1938, Anton Exner began sounding out possibilities of opening his collection to the public; here, his decisions appear to have been somewhat erratic. In January 1938, he proposed an initial offer to the Museum für Kunstgewerbe (Museum of Decorative Arts), as it was now called, with regard to permanent loans from the Exner Collection. Yet as early as February 1939 he had the idea of an autonomous East Asian museum, almost opposite the museum, in the former Hoch- und Deutschmeisterpalais on Parkring. The museum director protested successfully against this project, which evidently caused Exner to about-turn and seek friendly relations with the museum: in December 1940, he presented the museum with a gift of two Japanese woodcuts by Harunobu. In late 1943, the museum drew up a contract of exchange with Exner; by 1944, more than 800 objects had been transferred from the museum collection. In exchange the museum received objects from the archaeological epochs of China, with an estimated worth of 130,000 reichsmarks! In March 1944, a "notary act – donation contract in case of death" was drawn up, in the course of which over 2000 objects were transferred to the museum, first of all as permanent loan. This contract was followed by a second endowment in May 1946.

In October 1946, Anton Exner was summoned to submit a declaration according to the restitution resolutions on "Jewish property" in his collection. This prompted his explanation once more that the collection had been compiled during his trips around the world. We may add here that Anton Exner was not only an importer and salesman, but also an active local dealer. His submitted declarations – as far as are documented in the files – are not only disjointed and contradictory, but also reflect the obscure circumstances of ownership within his own family.

Restitution proceedings were conducted between 1954 and 1959 over two objects from the Exner Collection, which ended in a compromise with the return of the objects. Since then, there have been no other cases of restitution from the Exner Collection, nor could the intensive research carried out in recent years yield a concrete case of suspicion.

The Exner Collection in the MAK encompasses a total of over 3,000 objects, among them 1345 Japanese woodcuts as single sheets and in albums. The index of artists in this collection reads like a "Who's Who" of the ukiyo-e, with two landscape artists taking pride of place; they were evidently special targets of the family's collecting activities: Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849) – represented with 405 sheets – and Ando Hiroshige (1797–1858) with 308 prints.

In 1958, the museum received 180 prints from the legacy of the painter Hermann Freudensperger (1887–1956), mainly albums from the nineteenth century, but also prints from the twentieth, for instance by Kawase Hasui (1883–1957), Ohara Shoson (= Koson, 1877–1945) and Araki Yoshimune (1873–1945). This small collection was a valuable extension into the twentieth century. Hermann Freudensperger was a member of the "Neukunst" groups of artists and went to Japan – as did several other artists – in 1910, where he remained until his death.
It was around this time that the collection attained its present-day size, after this there were only few significant additions. One worth mentioning is the purchase in 1998 of a complete album of the small-format series "24 Forms of Filial Piety in China" by Kuniyoshi.

After 1950, numerous exhibitions were organized, presenting above all the works of Hokusai and Hiroshige. The comprehensive presentation of the collection in several Japanese cities in 1977/78 was of international significance for the museum.

When the author became director of the East Asian department in 1986, it was his primary objective to preserve this great collection in keeping with its value and reputation and at the same time initiate a cataloguing of the inventory corresponding to international standards. During an extensive stay in Vienna in 1993, Ms Harata Atsuko from the Miyagi Museum in Sendai, Japan, catalogued the ukiyo-e collection of Heinrich Siebold, as far as it was known as such at the time, and published this in Japan in 1996.** Participating in the cataloguing as well was the Institute of Japanese Studies at the University of Vienna, under the direction of Prof. Sepp Linhart.

It became clear that this huge task could not be accomplished alongside other projects, which is why the department has continued to concentrate on the cataloguing after finishing work on the Siebold Collection in 1997. All prints were scanned, mounted in new passe-partouts; as of 1999 work started on multi-lingual cataloguing and keyword-indexing according to contents. The financial and material funds made available by the MAK were considerable; we were supported above all by the Japan Foundation, which sponsored the purchase of secondary literature on the ukiyo-e.

The contact with the university institutes during this time has also yielded a number of diploma theses on the subject of the collection, which were able as well to integrate the Japanese woodcut on a major scale for special topics.***

Smaller exhibitions on Eizan, Eisen and single series by Hiroshige and Hokusai in recent years may be regarded as "interim results" of this work. The exhibition "Ukiyo-e Reloaded" and the publication of the entire collection on the Internet page of the MAK forms the preliminary conclusion of this project.

Provenance index of the ukiyo-e collection:

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* Tadashi Kobayashi, Koichi Koishi: Ukiyo-e meihin ten/Exhibition of masterpieces of the ukiyo-e. Exhibition catalogue, Tokyo 1977/78


*** Harald Suppanchitscho: Die Japonica der Bibliothek des Österreichischen Museums für Angewandte Kunst, Wien, Vienna 1993

Marc Schwarzer: Ukiyo-e & Hirumono. Tößwerungen in japanischen Holzschnitten und Holzschnitte in japanischen Tößwerungen, Innsbruck 2005
Index of all ukiyo-e exhibitions of the MAK collection

1899: Exhibition of Japanese color woodcuts from the Kunsthaus Ernst Arnold
1900: Hokusai's works exhibited in the k.k. öst. Museum für Kunst und Industrie (catalogue)
1977/78: Ukiyo-e meihin ten/Exhibition of masterpieces of the ukiyo-e. Tokyo (catalogue by Tadashi Kobayashi, Koichi Koshi)
1982: Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849). Wiener Neustadt and Vienna (catalogue by Herbert Fux)
1997: Kikugawa Eizan – Improvisationen im Vergnügungsviertel (Improvisations in the Pleasure Quarter). Vienna
1998: Keisai Eisen – Der Gang über die Brücke (The Walk over the Bridge). Vienna
1999: Eine gefährliche Stelle – Berühmte Ansichten aus den rund 60 Provinzen (A Dangerous Spot – famous views from the 60 provinces). Vienna, also Zurich 2004 (catalogue CD by Johannes Wieninger and Andrea Pospichal)
2000: Fuji – der Berg, den es nur einmal gibt (The Unique Mountain). Vienna (catalogue CD by Johannes Wieninger and Andrea Pospichal)

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