

EXHIBITION REVIEW

Embarking on a Journey of Discovery at 'Utamaro and the Lure of Japan'

By Lee Lawrence

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One of Japan's highly regarded ukiyo-e, or floating world, artists, Kitagawa Utamaro (c. 1753-1806), is the subject of three successive shows centered on three unusual works: wall-size paintings first displayed together in Japan in 1879 and later in Paris showrooms in the 1880s. One belongs to the Smithsonian's Freer-Sackler; another to Hartford's Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art; and the third—rediscovered in 2012 after disappearing in 1948—to the Okada Museum of Art in Hakone, Japan. Each museum is organizing a show, the first being "Utamaro and the Lure of Japan" at the Wadsworth (through March 26), where its "Cherry Blossoms at Yoshiwara" (c. 1793) hangs kitty-corner to the Okada Museum's "Fukagawa in the Snow" (c. 1802-06). Across the gallery is a full-scale reproduction of "Moon at Shinagawa" (c. 1788); the original is in the Freer and cannot travel.



Kitagawa Utamaro's 'Cherry Blossoms at Yoshiwara,' c. 1793

PHOTO: WADSWORTH ATHENEUM MUSEUM OF ART

All three depict Japan's so-called pleasure quarters, but unlike the intimate portrayals of Utamaro's woodblock prints—four of which hang nearby—they fill the walls with lively group scenes of courtesans and geishas. Each includes one or more musicians, an amusing incident involving a mischievous child or pet, a décor with ink paintings and other markers of taste, and subtle reminders of what undergirds this world—a glimpse of bedding here, the shadow of a man behind a shoji screen there. Kimonos and obis of brocade, taffeta and silks create cornucopias of colors, patterns and motifs. Willowy bodies sway, lean, bend and pivot as the women share gossip, munch delicacies, smoke long-stemmed pipes, read letters, or marvel at cherry blossoms. Some turn away, revealing pale napes with swallow-tailed hairlines. These scenes are as carefully choreographed as the public promenades in which a courtesan described by novelist Ihara Saikaku in 1689 “arranges her clothing so that her red crepe de chine undergarment will flip open to reveal a flash of white ankle, sometimes as high as her calf or thigh,” causing many a man to part with his mind and treasure.

Long attributed to Utamaro, the three paintings have historically been viewed as a trilogy. A most helpful brochure produced by the Freer and available at the Wadsworth notes that Japanese audiences would recognize in these images the fleeting nature of pleasure evoked in a couplet by the Chinese poet Bai Juyi (722-846): “Snow, moon and flowers—in these moments I think longingly of you.” Here the association extends to geishas and courtesans, glossing over the commerce and servitude at the heart of their professions by mesmerizing viewers with beauty, elegance, artistry, and the possibility of intimacy and romance.

The only other time the Wadsworth displayed “Cherry Blossoms” was in an eclectic assortment of museum treasures. Here, curator of European art Oliver Tostmann uses the painting to introduce the museum’s connection to the Japan craze of the late 1800s. It starts with firearms magnate Samuel Colt, a Hartford resident whose widow bequeathed much of their collection to the museum. Colt made sure the 1852-54 U.S. naval expedition to Japan, headed by Commodore Matthew Perry, included among its diplomatic gifts the latest Colt Revolvers. The shogun, in return, sent Colt gifts, of which we see two swords and a length of brocade teeming with dragons and phoenixes.



Kitagawa Utamaro's 'Fukagawa in the Snow,' c. 1802-1806; Utamaro's 'Two Geisha Preparing for a Fancy Dress Procession,' c. 1782; Large jar with cover (1875), Koransha porcelain works, decorated by Ichiryusai Uchimatsu PHOTOS: OKADA MUSEUM OF ART; WADSWORTH ATHENEUM MUSEUM OF ART(2)

A lively U.S.-Japan trade soon followed—ceramics and over-the-top cloisonnés fill a grandiose wooden cabinet from the Colts’ residence and assortments of sculptural netsuke, knife handles and tsubos (sword guards) illustrate the tastes of local collectors at the turn of the 20th century. Over the years, the Wadsworth

accumulated almost 1,000 Japanese pieces, most rarely or never shown. They range from export wares and souvenirs to classical works acquired during a second phase of Japanophilia. Mr. Tostmann has trotted out some of the best, including a pair of 17th-century screens with depictions of artisanal workshops that supplied the samurai and some 20 ukiyo-e prints, selected to complement and echo the paintings. The museum's 1957 purchase of "Cherry Blossoms" fits with this second wave of collecting.

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The Wadsworth's show does a good job of integrating "Cherry Blossoms" into the history of the city and an institution associated with American and European art. It also whets our appetite to know more. Why would Utamaro paint such unusually large works? And is this his work or that of a talented imitator? Were they ever intended as a set given their different sizes and dates? For a deeper look into such issues, American audiences will need to wait until April when the Freer-Sackler's "Inventing Utamaro: A Japanese Masterpiece Rediscovered" opens. This larger exhibition will delve into recent scholarship and showcase all three paintings. The Wadsworth's "Lure" thus begins an exciting journey of discovery.

—*Ms. Lawrence writes about Asian and Islamic art for the Journal.*

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