

摺物

# Surimono Album #3

Reproductions of a set of woodblock  
prints carved and printed by  
David Bull

1. Hotei Gosei  
Sumida River
2. Kaigetsudo Dohan  
Standing Courtesan
3. 'Sampo'  
Poetry Party
4. Ando Hiroshige  
Heron and Iris
5. David Bull  
'Senjafuda'
6. Ogata Korin  
Crows and Moon
7. Kashosai Shunsen  
Boys and Ox
8. Nishikawa Sukenobu  
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9. Gary Luedtke  
Hawaiian Canoers
10. Katsushika Hokusai  
Winter Scene

# Sumida River

Can you see the river in this print? Well, although no actual water is visible, that famous river *is* the theme of this image. We are looking at one print from a large set devoted to 'Famous Products of Edo' (researchers have found 13 images so far ...). The series was commissioned by a poetry group in about 1812, and was designed by **Hotei Gosei**, whose signature and seal appear at the right side of the image.

Unlike many Edo-era surimono, there seems to be nothing mysterious or difficult to understand about this print - the banks of the Sumida River were a famous *o-hanami* (cherry blossom viewing) spot, and a flask of *o-sake* and some 'nibbles' (*whitefish* in this case) were an essential component of any outing to see the blossoms, as they still are to this day.

I am particularly pleased to be able to bring you this image - for a number of reasons. One is that I think you have probably never heard of this artist before; it is my special 'promise' that these Surimono Albums will help expose and bring to light unknown treasures, and this print certainly qualifies! A second reason is that this is the first print I am making with the cooperation of the Chiba City Museum of Art. This museum owns many fabulous Edo-era surimono, and I have been hoping for some years that they would allow me access to their collection. Late last year I finally had a chance to see some of their prints up close, and they also gave me permission to include some in my albums. I hope that I will be able to bring you many more of their prints in coming years. I think that Japanese collectors of this album may be particularly pleased to hear this news, because I am sure that you are quite tired of hearing about all the wonderful Japanese prints that left this country and which are now held by overseas collectors and institutions. They are not all 'gone' ...

There is yet one more reason for my pleasure with this print, but I'm not sure if I dare talk about it ... again. Long-time collectors of my work know that I am constantly talking to people about 'how' to look at these prints - about how they look best when overhead lights in the room are turned off. But not everybody has been listening! One of the collectors was visiting me recently, and when we were looking at some of the prints he exclaimed "These are *different* from the prints you have been sending me! These are much more beautiful!" I promised him that no, they were exactly the same, but I knew what was 'wrong' - he had simply never looked at his own prints in the way that I recommended, in raking light.

I'm sorry to be a broken record, but please let me emphasize once more that a woodblock print like this is not just a 'picture' drawn by one man, but is a three-dimensional object made by a group of people, and that it needs to be viewed in the proper light to be fully seen properly. And it is because this print in particular looks so fabulous that way with the embossings fully visible that I bring this point up once more. (I promise not to hector you again about this ... at least not for a couple of months!)

\* \* \*

So the third Surimono Album is now under way. By the time you see this print, I will be deep in the carving work on the second one, which is another image that I have been looking forward to for a long time. As usual, I won't announce it in advance though ...

At the exhibition each year, I always refuse to divulge my plan for the upcoming album, and I know that this costs me some orders; some people are understandably reluctant to order something they can't see. Perhaps I am making a mistake with this policy. But perhaps not - together with the final print of the previous album, I enclosed a reply postcard asking collectors if they wished to continue with the next album. There was a small 'comments' space on the postcard, and I enjoyed this chance to hear some feedback from the collectors. One particular comment was repeated again and again - "It is interesting to always wonder what will be coming next!"

Thank you for your trust in me - I will do my best not to disappoint you!

April 2001

# Standing Courtesan

As usual, our second print of the year is a *bijin-ga*, and this year we have quite a special image - one of the famous designs from the Kaigetsudo school of ukiyo-e painters. Little is known about the men of this group, and my reference books are full of contradictory theories about who they were and when they worked. Most of the work produced by the Kaigetsudo school was in the form of scroll paintings on silk or paper, but they are known to have left a couple of dozen print designs as well. This one was done by **Kaigetsudo Dohan**, and the best guess for a date for it is 'early 1710s'. The signature reads 'Nihon-giga Kaigetsu Matsuyo Dohan zu'.

Full-colour printing had not yet been invented at this time, and this design was issued as a *tan-e*, which means the black outlines were printed from a woodblock, with colours added later by brush. The version you see here is of course all printed, and I have used as a guide a reproduction made in the Taisho era.

In my position as a westerner living in Japan, I am able to see a print like this from the point of view of both cultures, and am always surprised about how different these views are. From the western side, opinions are easy to summarize - the Kaigetsudo prints are seen as one of the greatest achievements in ukiyo-e, and ukiyo-e itself is seen as one of the greatest achievements in all world art. On those extremely rare occasions when a Kaigetsudo print has come on the auction market, collectors have fought each other madly to buy it; these are the most coveted of all Japanese prints.

On the Japanese side, things are somewhat different - not only is the name 'Kaigetsudo' almost completely unknown, but ukiyo-e itself is not even considered to rank among the 'top' arts. That status is reserved for things like calligraphy, pottery, noh performance, and tea ceremony. The most desirable art object in Japan would perhaps be an old master tea bowl; it could never be a woodblock print.

This attitude has mitigated somewhat in recent times; extensive praise from overseas over a period of many years has gradually lifted the status of ukiyo-e to a level where it is now accepted as an 'art' by the general population, but there is no question that such an attitude is not shared by those who consider themselves true connoisseurs of traditional Japanese culture. For these people, the idea of hanging an ukiyo-e print in their tokonama alcove would be completely inconceivable.

I myself have a rather simplistic attitude towards such questions; I am not concerned in the slightest with the 'status' of ukiyo-e, or of my position in Japanese society. In fact, the general image here of printmaking as a 'lesser art' has worked in my favour during all the years that I have been in this country. An acquaintance of mine here in Tokyo has been studying traditional biwa performance for many years now, and when I listen to his description of the 'iemoto' system under which he must work, I realize that I am very lucky indeed to be no part of that sort of thing. Absolutely everything he does is programmed and prescribed in advance; no deviations are allowed. He has very few chances to take part in performances, and little or no say at all in what he can perform. And of course, every step of his progress must be lubricated by plentiful amounts of money flowing 'up the ladder'. Speaking honestly, if traditional woodblock printmaking worked in the same way, I would not have lasted even a single year here in Japan.

So I am not saddened at all by the fact that the print you see here is not considered high 'art'. The phrase 'giga' in the signature on this print can be translated as 'for fun only picture', and is presumably meant to indicate a separation of this work from the artist's normal work of making paintings. He may have been willing to dabble in low-class work, but he wanted everybody to know what he thought of it!

But I like that phrase - 'for fun only picture' - and as far as I'm concerned, it might as well be on every print that I make!

May 2001

# Poetry Party

Our print this month is what is generally known as a 'Shijo-style' surimono - it is done in a very 'painterly' style, rather than in the crisp and clean ukiyo-e manner. The signature can be read as **Sampo**, although the inclusion of the character *sha* may indicate that he copied the image from an some other artist. We can never know ...

My reproduction is an exact copy of the right-hand portion of the print. The original version (which I have here) has a great deal more writing on it, including a total of 35 poems and the inscription *kinoe tora toshi*, which tells us that it must have been made in 1854. It was presumably made in commemoration of a get-together of a poetry group; perhaps the members felt that the party had been especially productive of good poetry, so they commissioned this surimono as a keepsake of the event.

Why didn't I reproduce the entire original? One reason is that it is simply too large; 35 poems take up a lot of space and the print is more than 56cm wide! Another reason though, is that I have to keep a balance between the calligraphy and the images on these prints - I suspect that many of the collectors of my work can't actually read this sort of calligraphy (neither can I!) and thus 35 poems is I think, simply too many ... So the lettering you see here on this print consists of the introductory comment together with two of the 35 poems. It was easy to choose which ones to include; the poems are all identified, and I simply chose the two written by Sampo, thus making it truly into *his* surimono!

It is interesting to look at the details of the image and to think about what kind of party they must have enjoyed that day. The red lacquered table, the patterns on the porcelain, the tall glasses for the drinks ... all these things tell us that it was 'Chinese food'! But remember the date - this print was made in 1854, just one year after Commodore Perry and the first of the 'black ships' arrived in Japan and began the process of forcing open the country to the outside world. So were there Chinese restaurants already open in Yokohama so quickly? Well, I don't know about that, but it does seem that the image many of us have of Japan as being a totally closed country during the Edo era is somewhat misleading. A trickle of trade goods did come into the country during those years through the port at Nagasaki, and it is interesting to see that the men who were interested in the creation of surimono were apparently the same type of men who had the wealth and position necessary for access to such rare goods. As I look through my books illustrating Edo-era surimono, I see many indications of this: surimono from the early 1800's showing Persian clocks, telescopes, imported Korean parakeets, even one mentioning an imported goods shop in Osaka in the 1820's ...

So this image of the Chinese meal is perhaps another in the same pattern; the sumptuary laws of the *bakufu* government did not allow such men much liberty for ostentatious display of their wealth, but we can easily imagine the pleasure with which one of the participants in this dinner would later be showing this print to others. "Please enjoy browsing through my album of surimono. Just trifles really, but perhaps you might find them amusing. Here's a little one that commemorates a little gathering our poetry group had a while back ..." The guest would be suitably impressed, one can be sure ...

I'm not trying to suggest that vanity was the entire motivation behind the creation of these prints; of course they are open expressions of visual and poetic beauty. But when looking over many original surimono, one can't help but get the impression that it was important to produce work that was as luxurious and expensive as possible.

Of course this makes me wonder about how *you* are showing your own Surimono Album to friends who drop by. "Please enjoy browsing through my album of surimono. It's a bit of an unusual selection, but perhaps you might find them amusing ..."

June, 2001

# Heron and Iris

Last month's print was a little bit too wide for this album, and this one is almost too high! Back when I started these Surimono Albums I spent many hours calculating a suitable dimension for them. There was no question that the album had to be in a square format - I knew that print designs would be in both horizontal and vertical formats, and there was no way that I wanted to mount any of them sideways, as I would have had to do if the Album was in a rectangular format. In the end, I decided on a size just about the same as an LP record (are there any among you who still remember those?). I find it a very pleasing dimension; prints in the most standard *shikishiban* size (like the first one in this year's set) fit into it very well, as do prints made in dimensions approximating the famous 'golden rectangle' (like most Japanese book page designs). But when I push the envelope in one direction or another, like I have done these past couple of months, the effect is not so pleasing.

I want to keep things interesting though, so I will continue to make prints of whatever size and shape, as long as they are stimulating designs. What I must do of course, in the case of prints which were originally much too large for these albums, is shrink them down. That is what I have done here; this design by **Hiroshige** was originally issued in what is known as the *tanzaku-ban* size - about 38cm high - but I reduced it to about 23cm. If any of you were considering putting these prints up on the wall in frames, this reduction in size considerably reduces the dramatic impact, but when they are held in the hand, or as you turn the leaves of this album, the scale gives a good feeling of intimacy, which is just what I want when I look at a woodblock print!

There are a number of gradations on this print, and as I was printing them I thought back to the years when I was working on the *Hyakunin Isshu* prints. Those prints had originally been designed back in the 1770s, and at that time the *bokashi* technique was in its infancy; no gradations were used in the original book at all. I 'broke the rules' a bit and did add some to a few of the prints in the series, but generally, throughout the ten years of work on those prints, I had very little opportunity to 'practice' making gradations. Now here in these Surimono Albums - month after month I find myself working on prints that contain numerous gradations!

Making a gradation on a woodblock print is a fairly straightforward process - moisten the wood in the area where the colour is to taper, apply the pigment in the 'deep' area, then brush it out smoothly in the effect desired. What makes it difficult is the requirement that each of the prints in the stack have an *identical* gradation. Modern printmakers don't really care so much about that, but to the traditional *suri-shi*, it is a very strict requirement. He may be free to test and experiment with various gradations during the proofing stage, but once the decision is made as to the desired appearance of the print, no deviation is permitted.

Why is it difficult to make them all the same? As one works, the pigment tends to 'creep' up into areas of the brush where it is not wanted, and the gradation becomes wider and wider. If one takes a break and washes the brush, then the succeeding prints tends to have a narrower gradation. It is much like trying to drive a car along an absolutely straight line; as you make small adjustments to the steering wheel the car moves ever so slightly from left to right. Some years back, my gradations varied in the same way as a beginner driver - veering wildly from one side of the road to the other. These days, I have somewhat more control, but I am still not driving in an absolutely straight line. I think though, that if you were to visit my workshop just on the day that I am drying the finished 200 prints, and were able to see them all stacked together, you might think that the variations between them are not so great ...

It's a very interesting paradox - working in a creative field, yet working as an absolutely mindless robot, trying to reproduce an *exact* image time after time. It seems there are advantages to being a stubborn person ... sometimes!

July 2001

# Senjafuda

I certainly seem to fall into these 'traditions' easily, don't I! Here we are at the fifth print in the album, and yes, as many of you must have expected, again I made a fan print for it. It seems I must have some kind of inborn desire to have such continuity and stability in my life! Perhaps though, I shouldn't speak too easily of continuity, for this print is very different from every one of the 124 prints that I have sent out to collectors in the more than 12 years since I first hung out my shingle as a printmaker. This one is not a reproduction of an old design, but something I put together myself. And when I say 'put together', that's exactly what I mean! The basic concept for this print is mine, and I sketched out the overall design of a fan lying on a tatami mat, but the seven images you see on the fan are taken from some old woodblock prints of the type known as *senjafuda*. Senjafuda were originally made in a simple black and white form, and it is these that we see pasted high up everywhere on the walls inside old temples or shrines, but in the Meiji period they became a kind of hobby activity, with enthusiasts designing and commissioning them for exchange with friends.

The full spectrum of colour printing techniques was used, and many thousands of them were made (and are still being made) that way; some wonderful collections were amassed, occasionally making their way into used book shops where they are eagerly snapped up by modern collectors. One such collector is Mr. Toshikazu Doi of Musashino City, not too far from where I live. He is one of the sponsor/collectors of this year's Surimono Album, and I visited him earlier this year to see his collection. I did so hoping that he would allow me to use some of his senjafuda to make this print (which I was then planning), and I was pleased to find that he found the idea interesting and gave his support.

Most of the seven images you see are taken from his collection:

- (1) Yoshida station from a set of 'Tokaido Goju-san Tsugi'.
- (2) a kabuki actor wearing the crest of the famous Danjuro clan.
- (3) cherry blossoms in the moonlight.
- (4) 'Meguro Persimmon', from a series of famous places in Edo.
- (5) a strolling minstrel (this is from a small print in my own collection).
- (6) Mr. Doi's own personal 'name' senjafuda.
- (7) a swallow and Mt. Fuji.

Mr. Doi's collection does not consist just of old prints from the Meiji era, but includes some that were made in recent years; in fact he and other members of his exchange group are commissioning new prints all the time. I was of course happy to learn this, but it did make me feel a bit sad in one way - how is it that senjafuda survived until the present day, but surimono died out? The main reason of course is that the *kyōka* poetry groups who were the main sponsors of surimono prints died out as poetry fashions changed; senjafuda were more flexible because just about anything could be used as a design.

But what a wonderful thing it would be if we could somehow revive the surimono genre here in the Heisei era! The pieces are all in place: carvers and printers are waiting in their workshops in *shitamachi*, and there are poetry clubs, calligraphy groups, and painting circles all over this country. Surely there should be plenty of interest in creating new surimono that showcase these arts ...

I was thinking about this a couple of years ago when I had the chance to attend the *utakai hajime* ceremony at the Imperial Palace. What an opportunity that ceremony could be for the creation of a beautiful surimono print each year as a memento of the occasion! But of course, as a very small and unimportant guest, I could not make such a suggestion.

Whether or not such a surimono revival can happen I am unable to predict, but in the meantime I will continue with my own personal attempts to 'wake it up'. Most of the prints in these albums will be reproductions of beautiful old prints, but just occasionally (*very* occasionally, I promise you!), you will see something a bit newer, like this month's print.

Now that I think about it, perhaps the print that you are holding here is actually the first *new* surimono to be created in well over a hundred years! Will it be another hundred years before the next one? We'll see!

# Crows and Moon

Time for a simpler image ... after the multi-coloured detail of that fan print, I think your eyes need something a bit more restful ... I know mine did!

I haven't been particularly successful this year in getting the prints well matched with the seasons, but this time I think I hit it right on! Although there is nothing overtly seasonal about this image, the round full moon in the sky is certainly a symbol of autumn here in Japan, so perhaps these crows are huddling together to fend off the chill of an autumn evening ...

I'm not actually sure who to attribute this design to - it is one of those images that has been copied, reproduced and adapted so many times by so many people down the years that it is hard to sort out its beginnings. My 'best guess' is that the original idea came from the brush of **Ogata Korin**, but I stand ready to be proven wrong. In any case, my use of the design is just one more addition to a very long chain. I'm not quite sure why this particular image has been so enduringly popular; after all, the crow is not exactly the most well-loved of birds. Perhaps it is something to do with the somewhat melancholy mood ...

I have my own measure of how popular this image is - this is the second time I have made a print of this design! Back nearly twenty years ago, when I was still living in Canada and dabbling in printmaking while I worked in a music store, this was one of the designs that I chose for my experiments. The print I made then certainly didn't look like this! It was pretty clumsily carved and printed, but I remember having fun working on it, even though the final result didn't much match the image that I could 'see' in my mind. This time I got a bit closer ...

And just in case the point needs more emphasis, I had another experience with this design just a few years ago, when I received a small packet in the mail from overseas. Inside was a woodblock print that had been carved and printed by an American man. It turned out that he was married to a Japanese, had visited and travelled around this country a bit, was interested in learning to make woodblock prints, and had made this print as an experiment ... and yes, he too had chosen the design of four crows on a branch ...

Unfortunately, it seems that he has not continued with any more experiments, and has instead turned his hand to dealing in woodblock prints, buying them here in Japan and selling them around the world. I say 'unfortunately' because I really feel a bit perplexed just why nobody else from overseas has taken up the same kind of work that I do. In the years since the end of the war, quite a number of westerners have come to Japan to become printmakers, but with the sole exception of myself, they are all modern 'artist-printmakers', not traditional 'craftsman-printmakers'. Their focus is on the creation of images, not on technique, like me. Of course, there is nothing wrong with that, and indeed, if everybody made reproductions like me, there would be no new art created! But why on earth has *nobody* else taken up this craft? In any other similar field you can think of: shakuhachi playing, washi making, traditional dancing, or of course the numerous martial arts, there are *dozens* of foreigners studying here in Japan. But in the case of traditional woodblock printmaking, there is only one ...

When I talk with people about this they usually say something like "Well, you should be happy about that - you have the field all to yourself, no competition!" But that's not the way I see it; I myself can't make many more than 200 prints each month - with 125,000,000 people living here in Japan, I think there is a potential market for a few more printmakers! I *want* some competition! I would love it if there were a flourishing community of us here.

Over the fifteen years since I moved to Japan to become a printmaker, at least a dozen times I have been visited by foreigners who expressed interest in doing this kind of work. In some cases I spent a lot of time with them going over basics and helping them to get started. Some of them even produced interesting prints ... one or two prints ... But no more than one or two, and then nothing else. The pattern is clear - they wander off, and I never hear from them again.

Is this job *that* difficult? Perhaps so; to make last month's print, I had to make 200+ impressions of 30 colours. That is a lot of impressions to do in just a couple of weeks, and I spent many very long days sitting cross-legged at my workbench, baren in hand. Perhaps indeed, you do have to be crazy to do this work nowadays.

But *look* at these albums - isn't it worth it!

October 2001



# Boys and Ox

Here's an image that I'm sure you have never seen before ... and by a designer that you've perhaps never heard of. Going by the initial character of his name, we can safely assume that **Kashosai Shunsen** was one of that multitude of men who passed through the studio of Katsukawa Shunsho in the late 18th century. I own a copy of the original of this print, and it shows, by the fold down the middle and the remnants of glue at the edges, that it is one sheet taken from an album, presumably a poetry collection. As is usually the case with surimono containing poetry, the image overflows with allusions to various interpretations of the poem. A gentleman who lives near me helps me with reading these things, but there really isn't any way that I can understand much of what I hear ...

You now hold this print in your hands, but it has been quite an adventure getting it to that stage this time! In last month's little print story I mentioned that I had made two versions of that crow print, and this month I find I can say the same thing - I have made this print twice. This time though, it was not by my choice ...

Although all my Hyakunin Isshu prints were carved on *yamazakura* (mountain cherry wood), since starting these surimono prints I have also been using *tsuge* (boxwood) for areas of high detail (faces, etc.). Because the box tree does not grow to a very large diameter, I cannot get entire 'blocks' made from box, but have been inlaying small portions into that area of the block in which the detailed part of the design is to appear. This has worked quite well, and has allowed me to carve some extremely fine detail - much finer than would be possible with cherry.

When it came time to prepare the woodblock for this print, I faced a bit of a quandary; there were three heads - each with some very fine hair carving - but the image was arranged in such a way that inlaying pieces of box would almost certainly result in visible lines appearing here and there in the print. So I decided to inlay a series of long narrow strips of box, enough to cover the entire surface of the design. I prepared the block, made it as smooth as I possibly could, and then began to carve. It worked very well, and all the delicate hair carving came out as well as any that I have ever done. As I sat and looked at the finished key block, the product of more than a week's work, I felt quite proud of myself.

Five minutes later, after pulling the first test impression, that pride had completely evaporated. I discovered that one of the boxwood strips had absorbed moisture a bit more than its neighbours and was no longer at the same level - the block was thus impossible to print, and beyond repair ... totally ruined.

What to do? Well, there was of course only one thing to do - start all over again. I made a second *hanshita* (tracing of the original image), and prepared to begin anew. But this time I didn't trust my own ability to prepare a stable boxwood block, so I asked Matsumura-san, the man who has been supplying me with cherry blocks for the past couple of years, to prepare an 'all-boxwood' block. He wasn't so sure about this practicality of this idea, but I pressed him a bit and he agreed to try. When the block arrived a few days later I pasted down the design and got to work.

Carving the same image again was a very strange feeling for me, sort of an extended sensation of 'deja vu'. But it gave me an excellent insight into the feelings of a traditional carver. It was common for such men to carve the same image multiple times - different publishers would perhaps commission them to make a famous Hiroshige reproduction, for example. But because I choose all my own projects, I have never had such an experience.

Was it 'boring' the second time around? Not at all; I like carving, and the boxwood blocks are such a pleasure to work with that the repetition didn't seem to matter much. Did I do a better job the second time around? I'm not sure about that; when I compare the two proof prints, I can't see any dramatic difference. The print has turned out pretty much as I envisioned at the beginning - the three heads are carved quite finely ...

And that too is now a problem for me. I carve such fine portions under a lens mounted on my bench, but when I look at the finished print, the detail is too fine for me - I know the hair is there, but I can't see it ... Whatever did the carvers do in the old days before lenses were available!

I certainly hope *you* can 'see' this print properly!

November, 2001

# Yoshiwara Couple

Back near the very beginning of these Surimono Albums, for the second print in the first album, I included a design by **Nishikawa Sukenobu**. At that time I made a considerable 'alteration' in the print; all of Sukenobu's work was done in the era before colour printing had come into common use, but I took the original monochrome print and added colour to it. I wanted to make it more 'beautiful', and I think I succeeded quite well; I used tones that suited the image, and produced a print that perhaps he himself would have designed had he lived just a few years longer. But a sort of 'hidden' motivation was that I was somewhat afraid of the reaction from the collectors if I sent them a simple *sumizuri-e* (black-printed-picture). I was worried that they might think it too simple ... too 'boring' ...

Last year, during the planning for the second album, I faced the same situation; I very much wanted to include another print from the early days of ukiyo-e, but knew that I couldn't keep on colouring them! So a black and white book page by Moronobu appeared in that set. Reaction from the collectors was muted; nobody complained about the design, but not many people commented positively on it either. Well here we are a year later, and again I've included a *sumizuri-e*. This time though, I think you'll find it looks quite a bit different.

Every one of the 28 prints I've made so far in these Surimono Albums has been printed on paper made for me by Mr. Ichibei Iwano, who lives in the village of Imadate, up in Fukui Prefecture. Mr. Iwano specializes in the paper known as *Echizen Hosho* - Echizen is the archaic name for that region of the country, and *hosho* describes this type of high-quality paper. This is the paper that was used historically for most of the prints made in the glory days of ukiyo-e - the famous Utamaro, Hiroshige and Hokusai prints. Hosho paper's main advantage for the printmaker is that it will withstand the repeated stresses placed on it when many colours are being overlaid. But in the early days before colour printing this type of paper had not yet come into common use for printmaking. As beautiful as hosho paper is, it just doesn't 'match' this type of design, and I realized this last year after completing that Moronobu print ...

So this time I hunted around for a paper that would be more suitable for a *sumizuri-e*. The one I chose is not made from *kozo* (paper mulberry) like hosho, but from *mitsumata*, another type of plant from which long fibres can be taken. This paper would not be appropriate for making a multi-coloured print, but is suitable for this clean and sparse type of design. I hope Iwano-san isn't upset that I didn't use his paper; I have no intention of abandoning him, and his beautiful hosho paper will continue to be the foundation that underlies my printmaking.

In most English-language reference books on ukiyo-e, the early prints are known generally as 'primitives'. I feel it was a very large mistake to establish such a terminology, because these prints are anything but primitive. Compared to the later full-colour prints they are of course simple, but because of this simplicity we can clearly see and understand their most basic element - the beautiful flowing line. Fabrics in real life never flow and fall as beautifully as they do in ukiyo-e prints, especially in these early designs. A print like this is a joy to carve, and the sharp knife slides smoothly through the wood as it follows the lines traced by the designer's brush. There is nowhere to 'hide' - every twitch of a muscle in one's hand is left visible in the print. This is Japanese woodblock printmaking at its most fundamental - rich black lines sweeping across the paper - and there are many people who believe that the subsequent introduction of colour was the 'beginning of the end' for the genre ...

I hope you find this style of printmaking as beautiful as I do. But one *sumizuri-e* in an album is enough - next month we'll have something completely different; from about 1720 we are going to leap ahead by about 280 years. And to make *that* print I am going to need every last ounce of strength that Iwano san's paper can give me ...

# Hawaiian Canoers

Did you do the arithmetic? At the end of last month's print story I mentioned jumping ahead 280 years ... and that brings us to the year 2000. Yes, for the first time in these Surimono Albums we have a print by a living designer. Of course, this means that I had to get permission to use the image, but American designer **Gary Luedtke**, who lives, not in Hawaii, but thousands of kilometres from the sea in Kansas, kindly agreed to cooperate when I proposed this idea, and gave me the 'go ahead'.

Perhaps some of you are familiar with the genre of prints known as *shin-hanga*. These were created in the first half of the 20th century, mostly by the publisher Shozaburo Watanabe, and were an attempt to carry forward the practice of cooperative printmaking - the division of labour between publisher, designer, carver and printer. In his day, under the heavy influence of Western ideas, print artists were coming to think that they had to do everything by themselves, from sketch to finished work. This was the way that the traditional ukiyo-e had always been made of course, but by his time, ukiyo-e was on its last legs. While recognizing that there would be artists who wished to work that way, Watanabe realized that such prints would never reach the levels of technical mastery that specialist craftsmen were capable of, and he spent a lifetime sponsoring the creation of a genre of prints that combined the work of new designers with the skill of the old craftsmen - the spectacular shin hanga.

Foreigners made up the largest market for the prints he published, and the names Kawase Hasui and Ito Shinsui, his two 'star' designers, became well-known around the world. Under Watanabe's astute sponsorship, the genre flourished for decades, only to be dealt a crippling blow by the breakdown in Japanese/Western relations at the time of the Second War. He attempted to revive it when peace returned, but was not able to repeat his former success, partly due to his inability to find more artists capable of producing suitable designs. Foreigners did continue to buy Japanese prints, but these were mostly reproductions of old ukiyo-e. And then some years later when the Japanese yen was revalued upwards, and such hand-made products became much more expensive, the tourist print market was devastated, and has remained moribund to this day.

I can guess your comment ... 'What about you!' Yes, of course I have given a great deal of thought to this, and I have even talked to people on both sides - designers and craftsmen - to try and get them together. But these efforts have failed to come to fruition, for two reasons. Foremost is that I simply haven't had the time to spend on such projects; my own printmaking - with its monthly deadline - keeps me occupied pretty much full time, as you know! But a more fundamental reason is that economics may make such a venture impossible these days; it worked when Japan was a 'developing' country and wages were low by global standards, but in our own time, when the standard of living is much higher, products that involve so much intensive hand labour may simply be no longer feasible economically.

This month though, because the publisher, carver, and printer are all one man, the equation can be made to balance ... so here you have the newest shin-hanga print to come into being! It's a long way from last month's Sukenobu *sumizuri-e* to this scene of a Hawaiian sea, but that's what these Surimono Albums are about - to bring you beautiful 'printed things' from all the long history of the Japanese woodblock printmaking tradition ... from three hundred years ago, right up to today, and everything in between ...

Will it turn out that traditional 'cooperative' woodblock printmaking in Japan is destined to die? Not if I can help it!

December, 2001

# Winter Landscape

Perhaps you thought we were going to be able to make it to the end of this album without including a design by **Katsushika Hokusai**? Not much chance of that - it seems that no matter what the circumstance, whenever I need a design that has to fit some particular combination of style, theme and mood, all I have to do is browse through my Hokusai books and I can be pretty much guaranteed of finding something that fits the bill!

This image is from one of his 'picture' books - the *Hokusai Gafu*, published in Nagoya in 1849. It's very difficult to find good copies of Hokusai's illustrated books. They were extremely popular in their day, just as were the famous Tokaido prints of Hiroshige, but although this means it is not difficult to find copies these days, finding *good* copies is another story. The problem is that items which were popular continued to be printed and reprinted even long after the blocks were badly worn. It seems that the Edo patrons were not particularly fussy about the quality of the prints they were buying, and publishers were happy to keep cranking them out as long as there was any kind of visible image left on the blocks. So we have the apparent paradox that the prints that were popular in their day were inevitably awful copies, while prints that didn't sell well, were nearly always excellent copies.

Needless to say, Hokusai has always been extremely popular, so nearly all the books and prints of his we now find are so badly printed as to bring no pleasure in the viewing. But a couple of years ago I got a note from a book dealer in Italy who thought I might be interested in a clean and clear copy he had, and he was right! It was a bit expensive, but I knew that it would provide good 'hunting' for images for my Surimono Albums. And so it has ...

I can understand why a book full of pictures like this one is attractive to us here in the year 2002; they are interesting images of a long ago and far away time. But just what did the original viewers - the people of Nagoya in 1849 - see in a book like that? It can't have been nostalgic for them in any way at all. To find the answer, we have to remind ourselves of one of the major differences between our life today and theirs back then - we are surrounded by imagery all day long, everywhere we turn: newspapers, TV, magazines, movies, books, pictures on the wall ... You and I have each probably seen literally hundreds of images today. But people back then did not have this 'parade' of pictures constantly in front of their eyes. Indeed, for most people in that era, to see an artificial image must have been quite an unusual event. I can easily believe that a Hokusai illustration like this was thus capable of actually carrying them into the scene, much like a movie does to us here in our own day. During the time we are looking at it, reality stands suspended, and we become part of the world depicted there. Just how strong such a feeling was for them I cannot imagine, but judging by the popularity of such books in those days, I think it must have been considerable.

We ourselves can of course never capture such a feeling any more from just a simple image - unless we were to lock ourselves in a cave for a year to escape all the pictures that bombard us. Perhaps only then could we *see* this one the way that it was meant to be seen ... Our eyes would start at the pathway in the lower left corner, and would carry us step by step as we zigzagged our way past the villages and through the lanes in the countryside, then eventually right up to the invisible top of Fuji in the background.

Just splashes of pigment on a sheet of paper - but actually an entry into another world. It worked for people in 1849 - I hope you can make it work for you too!

January, 2002

# Afterword ...

I was chatting with one of the attendees to my recent annual exhibition, when she asked me "Do you have exhibitions like this overseas?" I explained to her that I really hadn't given such a thing very much thought, and indeed, it was all I could do to keep up with my current system of one major exhibition here in Tokyo each year. She went on to say that she thought that people in other countries would surely be interested in these prints ... I had to smile at that point, and told her that, yes indeed, people in other countries were not only interested in seeing the prints, but were already collecting them!

Over on the left page you can see the names of the people who supported my work during this past year (through subscription to this third album, or purchase of one of the previous two), and among them you will see quite a few names from outside Japan. Historically of course, the idea of westerners being interested in Japanese prints is nothing new at all - ukiyo-e prints were among the items taken home by many of the very early visitors. And indeed, if this were not the case, you wouldn't be holding this album right now, because *this* particular foreigner wouldn't have made it!

During the years that I worked on reproducing Katsukawa Shunsho's *Hyakunin Isshu* a number of westerners collected them, even though those prints - with their inscrutable poetry and difficult to read calligraphy - were not the most 'accessible' designs. The type of prints that I am making now however, offer few barriers to understanding, and are very attractive to people from other cultures. If you were to count the names over on the left page, you will see that 26%, just over a quarter of my collectors, are now from overseas.

But if I haven't had exhibitions in other countries yet, how have these people discovered my work? Well some of them learned about it while they were here in Japan, but most of them have never actually been here - they found out about these albums from the internet, where I have a comprehensive website. In a way then, one could say that I *do* have an 'exhibition' overseas - one that is open 24 hours a day seven days a week!

The first of these Surimono Albums had rather a long 'gestation' period; during the last few years of work on the previous series, I thought long and hard about what prints to include in that album. Now that the series has been running for a few years though (which incidentally seems quite hard to believe), I am finding that I see possible 'candidates' for inclusion everywhere I look! Each time I peruse a book on Japanese prints I see some; and whenever I receive a catalogue from a print dealer it sends the idea basket overflowing! But having access to such a wealth of ideas can be a bit dangerous - it is all too easy to get greedy, or as my mother used to say to us kids "Your eyes are bigger than your stomach!" The challenge for me is to create a *well-balanced* set of images; as much as I would like to, it simply isn't possible to have all ten prints made with 30 impressions! And indeed, I have found from discussions with the collectors that it is quite frequently the simpler designs that are their favourites. Those though, are the most difficult to find!

That will be my challenge over the coming year - to maintain the standard of these albums through selection of appropriate designs, and of course through the creation of beautiful prints. Thank you very much for your support of this album. I hope you will treasure it, and will enjoy viewing it as much as I have enjoyed making it.

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February 2002  
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