

# TOYOKUNI I

## Last Master of the Grand Style

*By Merlin C. Dailey*

Utagawa Toyokuni I has long been an enigmatic figure in the history of Ukiyo-e. He has been labeled as an eclectic artist by both Japanese and Western critics because he borrowed the style of others at random. Although the last years of his career were spent in turning out coarse and decadent caricatures of his former efforts, he was nonetheless, a man of considerable talent who, for a short time, held together a great but declining tradition. Between his earliest period when he established a reputation as a versatile imitator and his later years when his talent disintegrated to such a low degree, Toyokuni I produced a body of work containing many of the finest, most notable designs in the history of Ukiyo-e.

I would choose to see him as the last great master of what could be called the Grand Style of courtesan and actor print design. The Grand Style refers to that large body of psychological portraits of Kabuki actors beginning with the late Torii artists and continuing with Buncho, Shunsho, Shunko, Shun'ei, Enkyo, Sharaku, Toyokuni I, and Kunimasa. During this time, the actor portrait began to lose the idealistic flavor of the Primitive period, characterized by such artists as Masanobu and Toyonobu, and took on a new sense of dramatic presence and realism. It became possible to identify certain actors by their facial features, especially in the bust portraits of Sharaku. The Grand Style developed in courtesan prints with the tall, languid, semi-realistic figures fostered by Kiyonaga and continued by Utamaro with his individualized portraits of beautiful women. Choki, Eishi, Eisho, Eisui, Shunman, Shucho, Shuncho and Toyokuni I maintained the Grand Style with variations on the styles of these two masters up to the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. With the noted exceptions of Kiyonaga and Toyokuni I, who were gifted in depictions of both actors and courtesans, most of these artists worked primarily in either one or the other tradition.

Born in Edo in 1769, Toyokuni was the son of a woodcarver who made puppets and dolls. Growing up in this environment, he was probably stimulated by the activity of craftsmen and their tools. As a youth, he was apprenticed to Toyoharu, founder of the Utagawa school, who was a great exponent of uki-e (scenes in western perspective). Many of Toyokuni's early triptychs of interior scenes of the Yoshiwara reveal his sound understanding of this technique.



illustration 1

As an aspiring young artist, Toyokuni found himself in a position similar to that of the mannerists in Italy after Michelangelo. The great artistic and technical innovations had either come to pass or were immanent.

Buncho and Shunsho had already set the precedent for more dramatic emphasis in

portraying the Kabuki actor. Toyokuni, at 15, was still a student when Kiyonaga was creating his great series of triptychs and diptychs depicting the young men and women of Edo's demimonde, and at 20 he saw the first bust portraits of actors appear under the signature of Shunsho's two main pupils Shun'ei and Shunko. Endowed with great vigor and ambition, and with a genuine respect for the printmakers working around him in the late 1780's, Toyokuni began producing *bijin-ga* (pictures of beautiful women) in the manner of Kiyonaga and Utamaro. His prints of this period clearly exhibit the attenuated figures made famous by these masters. It is tempting to speculate, as many writers have, why Toyokuni chose to follow the style of others in his early work. Some have claimed that he had no original talent. I would proffer the view that he was satisfied to follow in order to gain experience. I can imagine few artists in any time or tradition that do not owe a debt to the labors and talents of other artists working in their milieu.



illustration 2

In 1792, when Toyokuni was continuing to produce portraits of beautiful women of the Yoshiwara and views of their environs, Shunsho died leaving the whole field of actor prints largely unattended. Seventeen ninety-four was a momentous year. The great Sharaku appeared on the scene and, in the space of a year, produced an array of actor prints profoundly different from anything seen before or since. At the end of that year, he disappeared as mysteriously as he had come.

Toyokuni turned his attention to designing actor prints. He formed a fortunate alliance with Izumiya Ichibei, the publisher of many of Utamaro's bust portraits and some of Eishi's finest triptychs. Ichibei published Toyokuni's prints for roughly the next decade, which was the period of the artist's finest work. The famous series *Yakusha Butai no Sugata-e* (Views of Actors on Stage) which was to be Toyokuni's most extensive production, and which contained many minor masterpieces, was begun in the early months of 1794. One of the most admired designs of this series is a stately figure of Sawamura Sojuro III, who was famous in his day as a tragic actor (sheet number two of a pentptych, the only one Toyokuni designed). He is shown as a samurai in the guise of a wandering komuso with his straw hat and fan, in the play *Keisei Sambon Karakasa* which was performed at the Miyako-za in the 7<sup>th</sup> month of that year. 1. (see illustration 1) Another design from the same series, the center sheet of a triptych, shows the actor Sakata Hangoro III as Fujikawa Mizuemon with a snake, in the play *Hanayame Bunroku Soga*, performed at the Miyako-za in the spring of 1794. Hangoro, playing the part of the villain in the play, has an obsessed expression on his face, and the snake is indicative of his state of mind. With Hangoro's mask like face, Toyokuni came closer to a psychological portrait than even the great Sharaku. The folds of the actors black garment were printed by burnishing, and the gray ground is overlaid with a soft white mica. (see illustration 2) The virtues of this series have been extolled by many writers including James A. Michener, who said that

once this series is finally cataloged, it may number as many as 50 separate subjects.

It is interesting to note that both Toyokuni and Sharaku were making images of the same actors with the same decorative costumes in the same roles at the Miyako-za during the 1794 performances. Since certain of Toyokuni's designs appeared earlier that year than the same designs by Sharaku, it would appear that Sharaku may have been influenced by Toyokuni. It seems quite clear that they knew each other, but the extent of that relationship will never be known.



illustration 3

During this same period from 1795 to 1800, Izumiya Ichibei published another series of actor prints for Toyokuni identical to the 'Views of Actors on Stage', but with no identifying series title. These are also full-length figures against a gray ground. Like the series mentioned earlier, this group has never been adequately cataloged. It contains many wonderful studies of actors caught in moments of great suspense. Toyokuni

employed his full power as an artist and created in these images a style quite distinctive from any other. His power of observation was acute and focused on the drama being conveyed. He spared no efforts in getting the effect he wanted, making great demands on the woodblock cutters to press their skills to the limits and on the printers to print every nuance of color and texture. On certain prints of this period, whitening was occasionally added to the actors face to simulate make-up. White mica, and more rarely spattered ink, was used as background to dramatize a pose. A rough cord was sometimes tied under the rubbing baren used to strike the impression from the blocks so that a textured background could be obtained. (see illustrations 1 and 4) A splendid print from this group shows the actor Bando Hikosaburo III as Soga no Juro with a rat-trap in the play *Furiwakegami Aoyagi Soga*, performed at the Miyako-za theater in 1796. The actor is shown in a costume with a design of black crows and a design of plover on his jacket, a brilliant decorative device. (see illustration 3)

Many people who are unfamiliar with the Kabuki theatre find it difficult to understand the distorted poses and expressions of the actors shown in the prints. Kabuki is a highly stylized form of expression, which developed from the slightly older Joruri (puppet theater), where the action was marked by the jerky movements of the puppets in the hands of the puppet masters. Kabuki began as entertainment for the common people in the rich Japanese mercantile society of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The Kabuki actor relied upon action and gesture as well as speech to convey the drama. By his posture and by varying the pitch of his voice, he could imitate young people or old, lovers or villains. The chorus and musicians left the actor free to intensify the plot with his exuberant pantomime, while they supplied the thread of the story.

Subjects for Kabuki plays may be roughly divided into two major categories: historical dramas (jidaimono) which glorify Japanese legend and history with its legions of heroes, heroines, fools and villains, and the



contemporary domestic drama (sewamono) with its intrigues of love, comedy, mystery and vendetta. Schools of actors would specialize in certain types of roles. Actors belonging to a particular family would display the family crest (mon) on their garments, and they usually appear so identified in the prints. Almost from the very beginning, parts were played by male actors only, as it was felt by the government that female actors and dancers would tend to lower the morality of the people. Consequently certain families or schools of actors specialized in female roles (onnagata) while others, such as the Ichikawa school, trained actors mainly for male roles.

Designing actor prints continued to occupy Toyokuni throughout the last decade of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and into the first years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Influenced no doubt by Sharaku's great success with the bust portrait, Toyokuni produced a number of fine designs against light and dark gray backgrounds for various publishers including Uemura, Tsuruya, Kinsuke and Yamaguchiya Chusuke. Chusuke was also publishing Eisho's large bust portraits of courtesans using mica backgrounds at the same time. Toyokuni's portraits lack the quality of line and psychological power found in those of Sharaku, but they contribute a sense of realism to the natural flatness of the woodcut image, thus giving the figures a disquieting ambiguity. Toyokuni did a succession of prints from about 1796 showing two companion actors in half and full-length figures. The scenes were always moments of great emotional intensity in the play, when the actors were shown to best advantage in their most characteristic roles. Typical of designs from this period is a scene of the actors Otani Hiroemon III with a scroll in hand and Ichikawa Danjuro V in an undisclosed play. The fact that a play is not mentioned in the design would seem to indicate that the actors in their roles were well known to the theater-going public and that the print appeared concurrently with the production.

(see illustration 4)

Playwrights, authors, and artists alike used the teeming life of Edo for inspiration. They

frequented the Yoshiwara, the festivals, and the Kabuki theater for subjects the people loved: stories about themselves, current fads and fashions, and events with which they could identify. The writer Shikitei Samba, author of two volumes entitled 'Actors in the Third Storey', illustrated by Toyokuni and published by Nishimiya Shinroku in February 1801, relates in his epilogue, "From early morning, when the first strains of music are played by the orchestra, I sit close in front of the stage, regardless of being splashed by water and mud [from the stage] and content to bend my knees in a narrow seat and wash down a few bean-jam buns with tea sipped from a single cup. My friend Mr. Toyokuni is a man of the same kidney; but he sits high up in the third storey sketching while I sit low down in the pit gazing at the actors and doing nothing. We are, nevertheless, of the same taste; he paints while I write."



illustration 4

Toyokuni worked tirelessly during these years, producing a tremendous quantity of prints for the theater public. By opening night

of a new performance, or soon after, his drawings for a particular play were in the hands of a publisher who had the woodblock cutters hard at work. The new blocks were soon printed to specification and the fresh new prints delivered to print sellers on the streets. Not considered fine art by the public, these prints were essentially playbills for the various theaters and could be purchased for a few pennies in the print seller's shop.

During the years that Toyokuni was designing actor prints, he continued producing designs depicting beautiful women of the pleasure quarter. He produced a prodigious number of scenes of everyday life inside and outside the Yoshiwara in single sheets, diptychs, triptychs, and pillar prints. The influence of Kiyonaga and Eishi in his designs is unmistakable, and yet there is a stately and almost regal bearing in his designs that is a tribute to the persona of the Japanese woman. A fine example of his pillar print design is 'Young man supporting a girl who is trying to retrieve a shuttlecock from a bamboo grove', where we see his mastery in designing a most difficult format. The scene discloses the ambience of good taste and gentility so loved by enthusiasts of Ukiyo-e. (see illustration 5)

It is not clear exactly when Toyokuni began accepting students into his studio, but it was probably around the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when he was enjoying his greatest popularity. Unrivaled during this period, his influence on young artists must have been considerable. He became the official head of the Utagawa school and established a style for his students to copy which was, unfortunately for them, circumscribed by his waning powers.

It seems that his decline occurred abruptly after about 1803-05. The demand placed upon him by the publishers for more and more work no doubt took a toll on his creativity, but more than that, he began to grow careless and to lose his finer sensibilities. The stylish realism and flowing line that characterized his best work gave way to a stiffness of posture in his figures. Jutting chins and hardened expressions marked the faces of his actors, and his courtesans displayed a distorted, unappealing eroticism.



Illustration 5

Kunisada came to Toyokuni as a student around 1810, and Kuniyoshi came along soon thereafter; both were influenced by the master's late style. Fortunately Kuniyoshi was able to evolve and develop his own softer images of people, while Kunisada continued to produce in Toyokuni's late style for most of his career.

By 1820, most of the great print designers who had contributed to the Grand Style were dead, and Toyokuni I, the last great master, died five years later. He left behind a large number of students and a tradition that was to dominate figure print design in Ukiyo-e during its final period.

(footnotes)

1. The conceit here is that during times of curfew in Edo, only wandering Buddhist monks who had to beg for food were allowed on the streets after hours. These monks, who had taken vows of anonymity, hid their faces under straw hats and played a flute for alms. This was a perfect ploy for a young man in disguise to visit his paramour.

2. James A. Michener, *Japanese Prints from the Early Masters to the Modern*. Charles E. Tuttle Co. Rutland, VT. 1959

3. R.T. Paine. *Toyokuni's Pictures of Actors on Stage*. Bulletin of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

4. R. Lawrence Binion and J.J. O'Brian Sexton. Statement by Samba from *Japanese Color Prints*. 1954. pg123.

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