



Frank Lloyd Wright and Japanese Prints

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Private collectors in Chicago, Boston, and New York spent fortunes amassing Japanese prints during the first two decades of this century, and Frank Lloyd Wright was among the first to be smitten by the beauty of these works. He said he was "enslaved" by prints "because it is no secret that the prints choose whom they love and there is then no salvation but surrender." It is also no secret that they interested Wright as much for their monetary as for their aesthetic value. His sale of nearly four hundred Japanese prints to the Metropolitan Museum between 1918 and 1922 and the accompanying correspondence newly discovered in the Museum archives reveal both the rewards and pain of his career as a print dealer.

Wright, a champion of democratic art, greatly admired ukiyo-e (literally "pictures of the floating world"), mass-produced colored woodcuts with popular themes that appealed primarily to the lower strata of society, especially townsmen, in the growing metropolis of Edo (modern Tokyo) during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In his autobiography he recalled that

during the years at the Oak Park [Illinois] workshop, Japanese prints had intrigued me and taught me much. The elimination of the insignificant, a process of simplification in art in which I was myself already engaged, beginning with my twenty-third year, found much collateral evidence in the print. And ever since I discovered the print Japan has appealed to me as the most romantic, artistic, nature-inspired country on the earth. . . . If Japanese prints were to be deducted from my education I don't know what direction the whole might have taken.

The prints that Wright offered the Metropolitan, and those he extols above all others in his writing, are predominantly of two categories, namely Kabuki actor prints by the Katsukawa artists Shunshō (1726–1792) and his pupils Shunkō (1743–1812) and Shun'ei (1768–1819), and landscapes by Hiroshige (1797–1858). He admired the actor prints as virile images in which the full force of the art was shown most surely. He boasted that almost all the actor prints in any of the collections of the world were once his—at one time he owned 1,100 Katsukawa school *hoso-e*, prints of small size in a narrow, vertical format. He was a great theater buff and claimed that to him these prints represented the entire history of the Japanese stage. It is apparent also that the actors' robes create strong rectilinear and curvilinear designs enriched by the tension of bold ornamental patterns that bear a marked resemblance to Wright's own aesthetic vocabulary. The

dominant and greatly enlarged motif of multiple squares at the center of the rugs in the Imperial Hotel guest rooms bears a marked resemblance to the familiar Ichikawa family crest. Wright's particular fondness for the matinee idol Ichikawa Danjurō in the voluminous brick-red garments of the Shibaraku (Wait a Moment) role is easy to understand (see p. 48). Perhaps these stark portraits embodied for Wright the elimination of the insignificant, the virtue he praised above all others in prints. The nearly three hundred Katsukawa ukiyo-e that Wright assembled for the Metropolitan, including not only single sheets but also diptychs, triptychs, and pentaptychs, constitute one of the great collections of their kind anywhere (see p. 55).

Throughout his life Wright was enthralled by Hiroshige's well-known series, the One Hundred Famous Views of Edo and the Fifty-three Stations of the Tokaidō (see pp. 50–51). Their romantic and picturesque subjects had an obvious appeal, but they were also more generally available at the time. The best of the earlier prints had left Japan in the 1880s and 1890s to be sold in Paris by the renowned dealer Hayashi Tadamasa (1853–1906). Again and again Wright proclaimed Hiroshige to be the greatest artist in the world. When lecturing to his students at Taliesin, he enjoyed lining up many impressions of the same subject by Hiroshige for comparison. He held a print party at Taliesin every year: after a sukiyaki dinner he would bring out stacks of prints and talk for hours, patiently explaining the technique of the printing process (he owned many of the wood blocks) as well as discoursing on their value for students of architecture. "Hiroshige did, with a sense of space, very much what we have been doing with it in our architecture," he would say. "Here you get a sense of tremendous, limitless space. Instead of something confined within a picture. . . . On what is your attention focused? Nothing." He also told them that the prints would cultivate their sensibilities for landscape.

Wright frequently let buildings and trees break through the bounds of the frame in his drawings, but he carried the idea even further than had Hiroshige, who was, after all, constricted by the conventional size and shape of the wood block. Other Japanese qualities in Wright's drawings are his preference for asymmetry of composition, the use of a square red "seal," striated skies reminiscent of Hiroshige's rain, and the generally flattened, planar style of his renderings. The strongest connection occurs in the drawings executed under his supervision between 1904 and



Shunkō, Ichikawa Monnosuke II in the Shibaraku Role.



Hiroshige, *Maples at Mamma, the Tekona Shrine and Tsugi Bridge* (from *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo*).



Hiroshige, A Sudden Shower at Ōhashi (from One Hundred Famous Views of Edo).

1906 by his assistant Marion Mahony (see below). They are remarkable for their beautiful and unusual borders of lush trees and foliage, complete with birds. Wright penciled in a notation on the drawing for the 1906 De Rhodes house in South Bend, Indiana: "Drawn by Mahony after FLW and Hiroshige."

It is not certain when Wright began collecting ukiyo-e, but he may have seen the display of works by Hokusai (1760–1849) and Hiroshige at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, about the time he opened his practice in Oak Park. A photo of the interior of the octagonal library attached to his Oak Park studio shows a gateleg oak table with a Japanese print propped up on an adjustable slanted easel (p. 11). A similar table was among the furnishings of the living room of the house he constructed for Francis W. Little in Wayzata, Minnesota, between 1912 and 1914 (see p. 29).

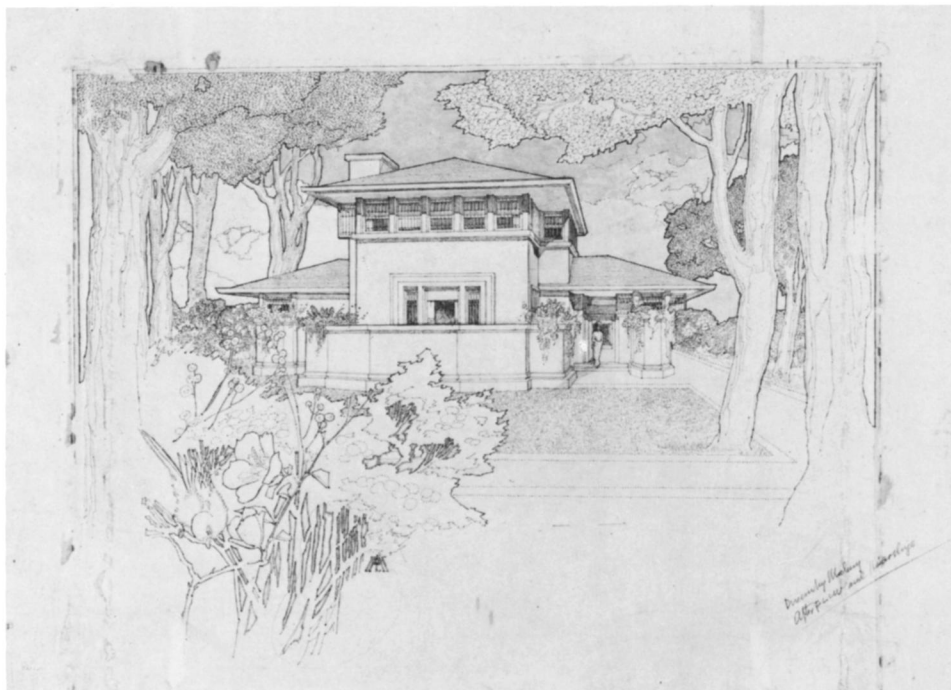
In February of 1905 Wright made his first voyage to Japan in pursuit of prints, and he did indeed return with enough expertise to stage an exhibition of his own Hiroshige collection at the Art Institute of Chicago in March of 1906. The prints were densely crowded, lacking the distinctive elegance of Wright's later wall groupings, but his use of narrow, vertical "pillar prints" (named for their display location in Japanese houses) as framing elements and decorative accents is already apparent.

Wright took part in a second print exhibition at the Art Institute in 1908 (see p. 53, upper left). Other Chicago lenders included Clarence Buckingham, then the foremost print collector in America, Frederick W. Gookin, Buckingham's curator and a leading scholar of prints, and J. Clarence Webster. Their combined contributions totaled an astonishing 659 prints spread through six galleries.

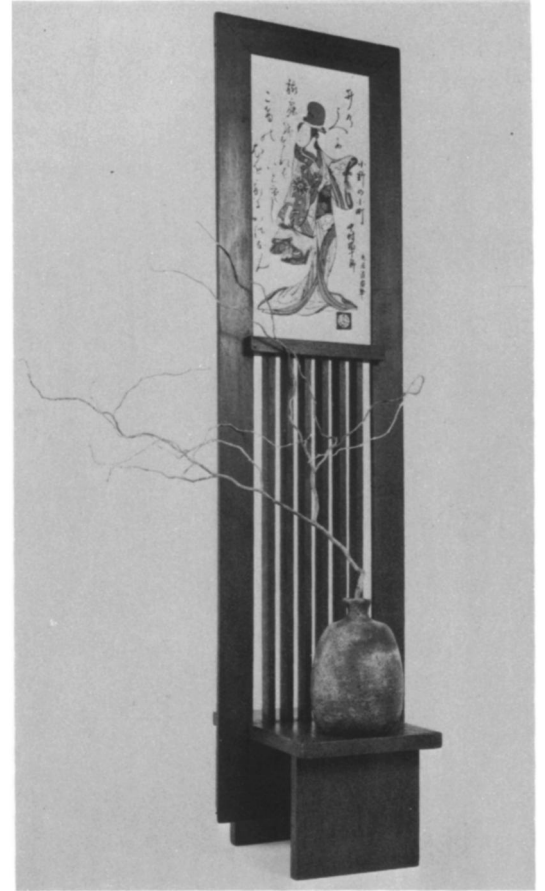
Wright designed the installation, which attracted a great deal of attention and favorable comment. The walls were covered with gray paper having a faint pinkish hue. Against this background the matted prints were hung in narrow frames of unfinished chestnut and suspended by green cords that made a decorative pattern of vertical lines across the upper part of the walls. Freestanding room dividers for the display of additional prints were flanked by posts capped with pots of Japanese dwarf trees and azaleas. The posts were appropriately accentuated with pillar prints. For this exhibition Wright had also invented a special three-foot-high mahogany stand for vertical prints, complete with a shallow projecting ledge to accommodate Japanese-style flower arrangements (see p. 53, upper right). The unmatted prints were fitted directly into the wooden frames, in accordance with Wright's desire to enhance those whose color had faded. A few years later Wright placed three of these small upright print stands in his own living room at Taliesin (see p. 53, lower left). Views of Taliesin interiors from the forties and fifties show that he also went on to design a print-viewing stand of honey-colored cypress with long, low proportions.

Wright liked to see prints hanging in the homes he built. The 1904 D. D. Martin house in Buffalo, New York, featured prints as the sole wall decoration in the hall, receiving room, and living room. The living room of the Little house entered the Metropolitan's collection complete with three of Wright's Hiroshige landscapes (see p. 29). Little at one time owned over three hundred of Wright's prints as well as quite a few Oriental rugs, a legacy of the architect's notoriously poor bookkeeping.

Wright was not only a collector but also a man of expensive



Rendering by Marion Mahony of K. C. De Rhodes house, South Bend, Indiana, 1906.



Top left: Exhibition of Japanese prints at the Art Institute of Chicago, 1908. Top right: Stand for Japanese print and vase. Bottom: Living room at Taliesin I, Spring Green, Wisconsin, c. 1911.

tastes who generally lived beyond his means. He was often forced to use prints as collateral for loans from generous supporters like Little and Martin. In 1910 Buckingham paid him some twenty-one thousand dollars for prints, most of which he had first to reclaim from Little, who had been holding them as collateral. Wright continued to recommend prints to Martin for their investment value, but Martin required prints only as inexpensive wall decoration.

In 1913 Wright entered into a serious business relationship with the famed Spaulding brothers, William (1865–1937) and John (1870–1948), of Boston, to whom he had been introduced by Gookin. William visited Wright that year at his office in Orchestra Hall in Chicago in order to purchase 100 actor prints. Hearing that Wright was about to embark for Japan in the fall of 1913 (in search of the commission of consulting architect for the new Imperial Hotel in Tokyo), William and Virginia Spaulding invited him to dinner at their Beacon Street home. It was agreed that Wright would receive \$20,000 from the Spauldings and set aside for them all the unique and superior prints that he could find, while keeping the remainder for himself. The original money soon ran out, and by the end of five months he had spent 125,000 Spaulding dollars.

I was to bring the prints to the Spaulding country home at Pride's Crossing. . . . [The Spauldings] had Gookin (as consultant connoisseur) present and several other collectors—Ficke, Mansfield, Chandler. For three days we laid out prints and prints and more prints and some more prints until neither the Spauldings nor Gookin (he was now leading expert in America) could believe their eyes. . . .

William Spaulding especially delighted—gratified was hardly the word—said, "Mr. Wright, this goes far beyond any expectations we had. You can't have much of your own after turning this over to us?"

"I have enough," I said. "I've done pretty well by myself, I assure you."

Charles H. Chandler and Arthur Davison Ficke were Chicago collectors, but Howard Mansfield (1849–1939), a New York lawyer, was a trustee and treasurer of the Metropolitan Museum. The Spaulding money had established Wright's buying power in Tokyo. Anything in the ordinary channels came to him first. "Wrieto-San" [as the Japanese called him] was . . . on the map of Tokyo as the most extensive buyer of the fine antique print. . . .

In December of 1916 Wright made the first of six long trips to Japan entailed by his commission to build the Imperial Hotel. "The pursuit of the Japanese print became my constant recreation while in Tokyo," he wrote in his autobiography. Wright's local guide and interpreter was the cosmopolitan and well-connected Shugio Hiromichi, a member of the imperial commission in charge of Japanese art exhibits sent to foreign expositions. The prints were mounted and grouped in Wright's workshop at the Imperial and then placed in Shugio's family storehouse.

In 1917 Wright wrote the catalogue and designed the installa-

tion for another exhibition of his prints, at the Arts Club of Chicago. He used the opportunity to praise his favorite artist, Hiroshige.

That same year Wright opened negotiations with the Metropolitan Museum for a series of major print sales. It was a time when he had severe financial problems, aggravated by a dearth of clients and the expense of rebuilding Taliesin after the disastrous fire and murders there in 1914. Over the next five years Wright corresponded regularly with S. C. Bosch-Reitz (1860–1938), who had been appointed the Museum's first curator of Far Eastern Art in 1915. Bosch-Reitz was a painter from Amsterdam who had spent the year 1900 in Japan, where he studied woodblock printing techniques and made at least one print of his own. He had a good eye and catholic tastes, and although known as a connoisseur of Chinese ceramics, he was, until the time of his retirement in 1927, remarkably active in the acquisition of ukiyo-e. The bulk of the Wright prints were purchased in two separate sales in 1918, for a total of \$20,000. Bosch-Reitz drove a hard bargain, selecting only one-third of the Hiroshiges that Wright had sent on consignment and dismissing the rest as high-priced without being very special. Wright responded instantly that he would hold onto them or offer them elsewhere:

The Boston Museum has none worth considering and they might be interested if the Metropolitan is not. . . . Look them over carefully. I have been in the thick of them for twenty-five years now and there is nothing better anywhere and in most cases nothing equal.

A month later, five days before Wright's departure for Japan, a desperate note to Bosch-Reitz arrived from Taliesin:

Take what prints you will at the price you think fair. I hope you will take many because I am sure the Museum will not have such an opportunity again—and I need the money.

I would rather almost be "land poor" than "art poor." The combination makes a permanent penitent of me.

Never again—

In Tokyo, Wright resumed buying prints. His Tokyo and Yokohama bank books for 1919 show payments to at least eight dealers.

Later that year he was even inspired to design a print gallery for the Spauldings. A skylight was intended to allow viewing by natural light, and plants—integral to all of his interiors—were judiciously located throughout the room. The walls above the storage cabinets were slanted, for ease of viewing and display, and a slanted easel, much like that in his Oak Park studio, was available for studying individual prints while seated. This ideal room was never built; the Spauldings may have lost interest in Wright, or perhaps they simply stopped collecting. In 1921 they promised their nearly seven thousand Japanese prints to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.

Early in 1920, while searching for prints on behalf of Howard Mansfield, Wright was defrauded of a vast amount of money by an unscrupulous Tokyo dealer who led him by train and rickshaw to a clandestine collection in a little Japanese house on the

outskirts of Nikko. Wright spent \$50,000 in two hours. Returning to America, he sold half of the prints to Mansfield for the same figure, making a tidy profit. But back in Tokyo again later that same year a fateful telegram arrived from Mansfield: some of the prints Wright had sold him had pinpricks, indicating "revamping"—or reprinting. Apparently several dealers had sponsored for years a studio in the country where craftsmen worked to improve the color of worn and faded prints. Wright was forced to throw open his vaults to Mansfield for an exchange of all the bad prints. A few years later, prior to his final sale to the Metropolitan in 1922, Wright explained the sad event to Bosch-Reitz:

I lost at that time—by means of restitutions I felt bound to make—about \$30,000, which I had earned by my work on the Imperial Hotel.... Upon my return to Tokyo I got after the principal dealer with all my resources—kept him out of business for two years on probation while the procurator had him in his toils—got the backing of the court with the help of Japanese friends in Tokyo and finally sold him out, home and all and took what he had which netted the munificent sum of yen 3500⁰⁰.

Since then, he continued, "not one print which is in any way bad has been purchased by me nor knowingly presented to me for consideration—and I think in Tokyo among all the dealers the matter is settled and most anyone now safe from imposition." He announced his imminent arrival in New York "to try and dispose of enough prints to meet my deficit this year.... In this matter I am a merchant and expect to be treated like one—I have little use for the 'gentleman' dealer in works of art. He bores me."

The Wright prints at the Metropolitan include some of the Museum's very finest ukiyo-e, but there are also a number of late and bad impressions and examples marred by conspicuous centerfold creases, as well as a few that have been revamped and others that have been remargined. Wright did admit to some "conditioning" of his own, but his correspondence with Bosch-Reitz suggests that he was naïve, dependent on the advice of his friend Shugio and exploited by a host of clever Japanese dealers. Hearing that Bosch-Reitz had questioned one of his prints as "too good to be true," he noted that he had it passed by the Old Prints Society in Tokyo, a group of ukiyo-e experts who had to give their unanimous approval for a print to be authenticated. Nonetheless, Bosch-Reitz was compelled on several occasions to admonish Wright for retouching prints he sold. In October of 1922 he sent the following note:

I dread to think what your feelings are going to be after reading what I have to say. However here it is: I went over the prints you left here and found that two of the early [Hiroshige] Toto Meisho set are revamped, all of the classic signs are there, pin holes, bright pink clouds, etc.... Further I found that of two Shunshos one background had been painted up with yellow and the other refreshed with blue.

If you allow me to give you a tip you should tell your man to take off the mats when he retouches the prints; painted lines which continue on the mat are a terrible give away.

Well now the worst is said, fume as you like.



Shunshō, Nakamura Tomijūrō I.

Wright, distressed by the accusation, replied the next week:

There is no intention on my part to deceive you or anyone else—I think you know this. Kindly forward suspected prints at once for inspection and comparison. I have never changed the values in any of my prints. As all collectors do and will do I have worked on them sometimes with color to retouch spots, clean surfaces, put the print into condition but very little even of that. I have done this usually with the mats on and no



Kiyonaga, *Shinagawa* (from *Twelve Months in the South*).

one could object to what I did. Long ago some fooling with some of my prints was done by my studio boys who had always access to them as to a kind of library—for their education and pleasure. But that was ten years ago or more and rejected long since. I have gone through the remaining prints carefully to eliminate the “taint” of the “vamp.”

N.B. Since the “revamping” came to light I have preferred to let my prints strictly alone—even to stains or wormholes or “pressing”—. And most of my prints acquired since that time are “as found” without the customary conditioning given by Gookin and others.

In the end, making the best of a bad situation, Wright was good-humored about offering to lend the Metropolitan a group of sixty finely executed “vamps” (“true vampires,” as he called them, “convicted and generally admired as such”) for a study exhibition that Bosch-Reitz had in mind. One such vampire, perhaps a legacy of the Tokyo scandal, was accepted from Wright as a gift in 1921 (above). It is a Kiyonaga diptych depicting a group of courtesans entertaining a customer at a teahouse in Shinagawa with a view of Tokyo Bay. The unprinted areas of sky and faces are heavily soiled and worn, yet the fugitive blue and purple in the robes and along the horizon, as well as the red, another sensitive color, appear incongruously fresh, as though in pristine condition. When the print is viewed from behind, numerous pin holes are visible. Guidelines for the tracer when cutting new color blocks, pin holes are the surest clues to a reworked print. In addition, facial outlines have been strengthened with a single-hair brush, and numerous large holes have been cleverly patched from behind. By coincidence, the left side of this same diptych is shown propped up on the print table in the early photo of Wright’s Oak Park studio (p. 11).

Surviving records indicate that Wright’s last purchase from a

Japanese dealer was made in 1923. He never returned to Japan thereafter. Although he continued to acquire Japanese art until the end of his life, his days as a serious print dealer were over. It was an interesting chapter in his life but a difficult one as well, if only from the point of view of the amount of his working time the prints consumed. He once told his apprentices at Taliesin that while he was drawing for the Imperial Hotel, vendors of Japanese prints were lined up outside his office, interrupting him throughout the day. In the end, however, the exhilaration of the search and the pride in forming a number of great American collections outweighed the sense of frustration or disappointment. His own compelling argument in favor of print selling was that it allowed him to refuse any work or clients that did not interest him—an enviable position.

Wright bought prints for many reasons—for investment (Japanese prints practically built Taliesin I and II, he said), for decoration, but above all for artistic and even spiritual inspiration. It is awesome that many of the best ukiyo-e in American museums passed through his hands. At the Metropolitan there are not only the Bosch-Reitz acquisitions but also the hundreds of outstanding Mansfield prints that entered the collection in 1936. Numerous Wright prints are among the 1,400 that Buckingham left to the Art Institute of Chicago; among the Spaulding prints at the Museum of Fine Arts; and among collections in museums in Kansas City, Minneapolis, Ann Arbor, and Philadelphia, to name but a few. Wright spent nearly half a million dollars in Japan on prints, a sum that would be exceptional even today. In his own words, the Japanese print is “one of the most amazing products of the world, and I think no nation has anything to compare with it.”

The installation of the Frank Lloyd Wright Room and the accompanying exhibition have been made possible through the generosity of Saul P. Steinberg and Reliance Group Holdings, Inc.