

ASIAN ART MUSEUM  
Chong-Moon Lee Center  
for Asian Art & Culture

200 Larkin Street  
San Francisco, CA 94102  
T 415.581.3500

## NEWS



**Asian  
Art  
Museum**

### PRESS CONTACT:

Zac T. Rose

415.581.3560

[zrose@asianart.org](mailto:zrose@asianart.org)

## Asian Art Museum Presents Superb Japanese Prints Highlighting Origins of 19th-Century Tattoo Culture



San Francisco, March 19 , 2019 — About 45 million Americans have at least one tattoo, although it may seem like even more if you live in the Bay Area. A comparable craze for full-body tattoos swept Japan's 19th century cities, nowhere more than in trendsetting Edo (modern Tokyo). ***Tattoos in Japanese Prints***, an exhibition on view at the Asian Art Museum from May 31-Aug. 18, recounts how large-scale, intricately-linked pictorial tattoos — what we now recognize as a distinctly Japanese style — emerged in 19th-century Japan in tandem with woodblock prints depicting tattooed heroes of history and myth.

With more than 60 superb works from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston collection, *Tattoos in Japanese Prints* uncovers the complex interplay between ink on paper and ink on skin, revealing the origin of some of the most world's enduring and popular tattoo motifs. The exhibition traces these designs to a famous set of prints by artist Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1797–1861), a series which was itself inspired by a popular 14th-century Chinese martial-arts novel.

“By putting the aesthetic genius of Japanese printmakers on full display, this exhibition underscores how the popular culture of late Edo-period Japan continues to influence how we express ourselves today,” says Jay Xu Asian Art Museum Director and CEO. “We’re excited to share such eye-catching prints with every kind of visitor: from collectors and

*Du Xing, the Devil Faced*, from the series *One Hundred and Eight Heroes of the Popular Water Margin*, 1843–1847, by Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1797–1861). Woodblock print; ink and colors on paper. *Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Bequest of Maxim Karolik*, 64.809. Photograph © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

connoisseurs familiar with the technical virtuosity of these artworks, to audiences who want to understand more about the surprising history of their own personal ink.”

While searching for new subjects for his prints, Kuniyoshi hit upon the idea of a print series focused on hero-bandits from the famed “Water Margin” tale, which was first translated from Chinese and published in Japan between 1757 and 1790. Kuniyoshi called his series, published in the late 1820s, *One Hundred and Eight Heroes of the Popular Water Margin*. Significantly for the history of tattoo art, Kuniyoshi gave many of the heroes elaborate tattoos, even if the original text did not mention any inked embellishment on their bodies.

“*Tattoos in Japanese Prints* lets museum visitors see how creative ideas flowed from popular art into urban life, and back again,” says Laura Allen, Asian Art Museum chief curator and curator of Japanese art. “Scholars are uncertain whether Kuniyoshi’s series kicked off the 40-year tattoo boom that followed, or if a nascent fad for body art prompted Kuniyoshi’s artwork, but the ample prints we have from this period by Kuniyoshi and others, who freely imagined elaborate tattoos, probably both inspired and reflected the real-life trend.”

### **Prints Showcase Tattoo Symbolism, Interplay with Kabuki Theater**

*Tattoos in Japanese Prints* explores the historical context for the novel iconography introduced by Kuniyoshi and other celebrated artists, including Utagawa Kunisada (1786-1864), Tsukioka Yoshitoshi (1839-1892), and Toyohara Kunichika (1835-1900). These designs came to adorn the bodies of real-life Japanese urban men, both laborers and dandies. Many popular motifs of the time—lions, eagles, peonies, dragons, giant snakes, swords, and fierce figures like the Buddhist deity Fudo Myoo—remain part of the lexicon of Japanese-style tattoos today.

The fad for tattoos was also inseparable from the kabuki theater—Japan’s popular live-action dramatic form.



Woodblock prints of the time both document tattooed heroes in known kabuki plays, and inventively went beyond the actual plays to feature the likenesses of prominent kabuki actors in imagined roles or off-stage moments where they sport elaborate tattoos. The resulting artworks combined emblems of bravery, valor and strength with the potency of celebrity, and the exhibition devotes a section to the intertwined popularity of kabuki and tattoo imagery. Several of the prints feature surprising gender-bending and fantasy elements that highlight the essential playfulness of the artists and the sometimes-whimsical nature of the genre. Cross-dressing was a tenet of kabuki storytelling since

female performers were forbidden on the stage, and in real life actors were never tattooed—in performances they wore painted tattoos or close-fitting garments decorated with tattoo designs.

Intriguingly, scholars speculate that early tattoo artists might have been woodblock cutters from the printing industry. These artisans would have honed their skills transferring a two-dimensional artist's drawing to the three-dimensional surface of the printing blocks: a short jump to the equally dynamic surface of a human body.

*Tattoos in Japanese Prints* sheds light on the history of tattooing by presenting examples of the much smaller-scale tattoo practices of previous centuries—declarations of religious devotion or the inking of a sworn lover's name (as in a painfully realistic print [1798-99] from Kitagawa Utamaro [1750s-1806], or in selections from two erotic books included in the exhibition). These more modest tattoos bookend the vogue for elaborate body art in Japan, which ultimately lasted only for about forty years, until the early Meiji period (1868–1912). At this point, the Japanese government, considering tattoos “old fashioned,” prohibited them as part of its effort to modernize the country. Officially suppressed, tattoos slowly became associated with gangs and the criminal underworld.

“With the official suppression of tattoos, artists largely stopped designing prints of tattooed figures. The woodblock prints in this show survive as some of the best documentation we have of real-life tattoos in 19th-century Japan, and arguably they played a role in ensuring that these motifs endured,” explains Allen. “Despite the government's wishes, foreign tourists, as well as navy and merchant sailors visiting Japan, were intrigued by local tattoos and found multiple channels for carrying them home. The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston's collection shines a brilliant light on the creative network of artists and artisans that inspired them.”

Tattoo imagery continued to be memorialized in reissued prints, on new photographic postcards, spotted on men who had received their tattoos before the government ban, or was inked directly onto visitors, and a longstanding global fascination with—and deep appreciation for—Japanese tattoo design was ignited.

“From the world-famous tattoo artist Don Ed Hardy to the home-grown inkers in San Francisco's Mission District, great tattoo art and Japanese design share an indelible connection,” continues Xu. “We are delighted to flesh out this fascinating moment when art turned into life and life into art.”

### **Exhibition Programs Bring *Knives and Needles* to the Table**

San Francisco is synonymous with great food—and great body art. *Tattoos in Japanese Prints* is the perfect opportunity to bring together enthusiasts from across the Bay Area to talk about the inspiration behind their cooking, their inking, and explore a shared passion for craft and style to suit every taste.

Please visit [www.asianart.org](http://www.asianart.org) for programming updates.

### **Japanese Tattoos: The Visual Splendor of the Floating World**

Thursday, June 13

6:30 – 7:30 PM

\$5 plus museum admission

Join us in a conversation with the Bay Area's most distinguished and world-renowned tattoo artists including Don Ed Hardy, Junii Shimada of Diamond Tattoo, Taki Kitamura of State of Grace, and Mary Joy Scott of Tattoo City, as they discuss the captivating art of Japanese tattooing, past, present, and future.

### **Ukiyo-e Printing Workshop with Artist Tomoko Murakami**

Saturday, June 15

1:00 – 4:00 PM

Pre-registration required

\$20 plus museum admission

Learn the art of Japanese Ukiyo-e printing techniques and create your own original prints in this hands-on weekend workshop.

### **At the Table with *Knives and Needles* author Molly Kitamura featuring tattoo artist Chad Koeplinger**

Thursday, June 20

6:30 – 8:00 PM

\$5 members, \$15 general, includes museum admission. \$13 for students, seniors

Learn how to make a delicious chicken korma dish with *Knives and Needles* author Molly Kitamura featuring foodie tattoo artist Chad Koeplinger. Hear the chefs' own "tattoo tales."

### **Tea and Talk with Monica Lo and Felicity Chen**

Thursday, July 11

6:30 – 8:00 PM

\$5 members, \$15 general, includes museum admission. \$13 for students, seniors

Check website for details about this exciting event with two nationally-known figures, including a participatory tea ceremony and new developments in traditional healing—from hemp to honey!

### **Live Tattooing at the Asian Art Museum**

Saturday, July 13

1:00 – 4:00 PM

Free with museum admission

Discover the complex and fascinating artform of tattooing as demonstrated by some of the Bay Area's finest tattoo artists, including Taki Kitamura and Horitomo of State of Grace, and Mary Joy Scott of Tattoo City.

### **Talk with Ichi Sushi Executive Chef Tim Archuleta**

Thursday, August 15

6:30 – 7:30 PM

\$5 members, \$15 general, includes museum admission. \$13 for students, seniors

Come learn about Ichi Sushi co-owner and Executive Chef Tim Archuleta's adventures into the culinary world of traditional sushi—and hear his own “tattoo tale.”

### **Exhibition Organization and Publication**

*Tattoos in Japanese Prints* is organized by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Presentation is made possible with the generous support of Lucy Sun and Warren Felson. Additional support is provided by the Ellen Bayard Weedon Foundation.

The exhibition is accompanied by a catalogue, featuring a comprehensive essay by Sarah E. Thompson, curator of Japanese art at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and detailed entries of nearly 50 full-color artworks, 151 pages, hardcover (\$24.95).

### **About the Asian Art Museum**

The Asian Art Museum—Chong-Moon Lee Center for Asian Art and Culture is one of San Francisco's premier arts institutions and home to a world-renowned collection of more than 18,000 Asian art treasures from throughout Asia spanning 6,000 years of history. Through rich art experiences, centered on historic and contemporary artworks, the Asian Art Museum unlocks the past for visitors, bringing it to life while serving as a catalyst for new art, new creativity and new thinking.

**Information:** 415.581.3500 or [www.asianart.org](http://www.asianart.org)

**Location:** 200 Larkin Street, San Francisco, CA 94102

**Hours:** The museum is open Tuesdays through Sundays from 10 AM to 5 PM. Hours are extended on Thursdays until 9 PM February through September. Closed Mondays, as well as New Year's Day, Thanksgiving Day and Christmas Day.

**Museum Admission:** FREE for museum members and children (12 & under). \$25 for adults and \$20 for seniors (65 & over), youth (13–17) and college students (with ID). On Target First Free Sundays and on Thursday evenings, 5-9 PM, admission to the museum is \$10. Please check website for updates.

**Access:** The Asian Art Museum is wheelchair accessible. For more information regarding access: 415.581.3598; TDD: 415.861.2035.

Never miss a moment: @AsianArtMuseum #Tattoos

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