

The Language of the Hands in Ukiyo-e

By Inada Toshiyuki

There are many occasions when the hands are an important part of the way we express ourselves. We shake hands as a form of common courtesy and greeting. In Japan, *teuchi* or clapping the hands in unison has the meaning of reconciliation or to strike a bargain. Further, a handprint or *tegata* was formerly used as a kind of seal, and came to mean a promissory note in the legal sense. We also applaud with our hands, invite or beckon someone with them and express all manner of emotions and feelings with hand movements that are an indispensable part of our daily lives.

The idea that the hands can betray a person is, of course, very old and people have believed that gestures even have some mysterious powers. There is no doubting the fact that the expressive movements of the face and the body as a whole are an important way of communicating our feelings but in many cases it is the movement of the hands which serves to emphasize the overall impression. Of course, not all of what we express through our hands is aes-

thetically pleasing. Nevertheless, the expressive qualities and sentiments of the hands which we use everyday is a manifestation of our inner feelings and has a great deal of meaning.

The usefulness of hands to man both as an artist and as a technician goes without saying and the freedom of expression that is possible with them satisfies every condition we are confronted with as we go through life.

Just as in English, the word for hand figures in a number of expressions in Japanese. If something is "handmade," for example, we use a literal combination of the word for hand (*te*) and the noun form of the verb to make (*tsukuru*), thus giving the word, *tezukuri*. Similarly and very consistent with the English way of describing a child as a "handful," the phrase *te ni amaru*, or literally to be "overflowing from the hands," has the meaning of unmanageable or beyond one's capability. The idea of roughness and severity is expressed by *te-kibishi*, or quite literally a "harsh hand." In all cases, however, such expressions encapsulate a feeling or profundity, or are used simply to imply a particular meaning. Again, *te wo awaseru* or the placing of the hands together when standing before a holy place, image or enshrined deity is a sign of spiritual unity and calm, and is further evidence of just how much emphasis the Japanese place on the hands as a way of expressing things.

In *ukiyo-e*, too, hands play



Ohyakudo: The hands and arms in this print by Harunobu are handled as an integral part of the total curvilinear composition of the young girl on her way up shrine steps

their part. In terms of composition, it was the job of the woodblock print artist to try his best to use the limited area of a print within which to develop a composition and to invest it with some significance. Firstly, they made fine use of the blank areas or negative shapes within the single figure and group portraits. But it is always the movement of the hands and sometimes arms within the same format that is always highly contributive to the total composition. In actual fact, in terms of reality, a totally different impression is created by the way that the hands and arms are strangely elongated compared to the rest of the body, or by the way hands are drawn under-size, or even by the amount of slimness with which they are drawn. Nevertheless, in many cases the whole arrangement and space within a print is pulled together to create an aesthetically pleasing composition by the way the hands and arms are depicted, despite the fact that compared to the head they are actually drawn out of proportion. Such compositions are, in fact, fine examples of a form of expression using the expressive movement of the hands and flowing lines, features which can be found in the work of a number of print artists.

The highly prolific Harunobu, who was active during the middle of the 18th century, drew hands and arms with particular elegance so that they would form part of the total design of a print. There



Arashi Ryuzo as the money lender Ishibe Kinkichi: In this print by Sharaku, the hands are far too small in relation to the head, and yet the composition works

were few besides him who so ingeniously used the movement of the fingers to set off the flowing curvilinear form of the figures appearing in his prints. In many instances he would leave the arms and sometimes hands hidden by the kimono sleeves and yet the movement of the figure and the background provided sufficient information for us to grasp the content of the work.

The hands drawn by Sharaku in his famous actor prints and portraits played a particularly dynamic role within the composition of his prints. In fact, the very individual way he handled the drawing of the faces and indeed the hands went a long way to reaching the very essence of the characters of the people he portrayed.

The cohesive nature of these prints and the sense of presence they have is due in no small part to the way Sharaku drew the hands, through which he was able to express such things as humor, happiness, anger, bewilderment and even of being absorbed in thought. The proportional imbalance between the hands and the rest of the body is part of the appeal of his prints and the sense of movement and direction of the hands within the whole composition is so definitive that it makes it difficult to imagine them in any other position. There are even instances when it seems as though Sharaku must have taken particular pleasure from the drawing of the



Kiri-musume: an Utamaro portrait in which the hands are expressed with particular sensitivity

hands because of the fineness with which they are depicted, almost as if he was making a study of an insect.

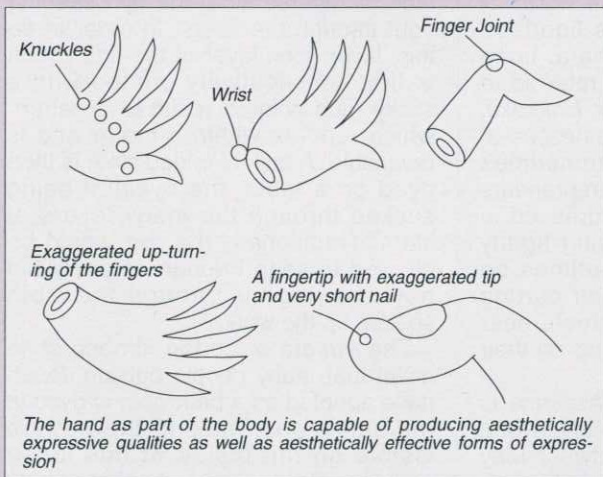
It is the coloring and arrangement of the elements in Utamaro's prints that make them so attractive. He expressed in a very personal and idealized way the beauty of the female form, breathing life into his subjects without any sense of incongruity and despite the proportional inconsistencies with which the hands are drawn. The degree of exaggeration he employed in no way hinders our enjoyment of his prints and is surely a mark of the artistic abilities of Utamaro and the life in his art.

Most of the women Utamaro depicted were round-faced and even a little on the plump side, a fact that is also evident in the hands. He portrayed courtesans and prostitutes in the licensed pleasure quarter of Edo, some reading letter scrolls. In one series, *Hokkoku Goshikizumi*, a young woman is shown in a print entitled *Kiri-musume* in a pose which is pensive rather than one of refined contemplation. The movement described by the delicate nails and fingers, however, expresses her feelings much more than the features of the face. The way that the fingers of the right hand curl following the folds of the letter scroll beautifully express a moment of



innocent sweetness.

Somewhat differently to Western art, the drawing of the fingertips in Japanese art is handled with particular care and is considered part of a woman's beauty. In the Edo period especially, people were very conscious of the hands, particularly those of women. This was partly due to the way they were placed in front when bowing low in a kneeling position on *tatami* matting, or on other occasions when the hands were in close proximity to another person. Women therefore took great pride in the beauty of their hands. In prints of the late Edo period, the nails are drawn rather deep and not extending beyond the fingertips, as is common in modern times. Attention is also given to the position of each joint and the implied movement of each one, and along with the bending back of the fingers, makes up part of the language of the hands, which is so well documented in Ukiyo-e prints. ■



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