

Uki-e — Perspectives of a New Kind

By Inada Toshiyuki

Before trying to explain what *uki-e* or "perspective pictures" are, it is worth considering some of the types of expression used in Japanese art and the way graphic images are understood.

Space, for example, is expressed in a number of different ways in two-dimensional art in Japan. First of all, there is the kind of "roofless architecture" or *fukinuki-yatai* found in scroll paintings illustrating the Tale of Genji. For the sake of convenience, room

spaces are seen from above, similar to an isometric projection. A comparable bird's-eye view is adopted for *shakei-byōsha* where a viewpoint above and slightly to one side of a subject is employed and the surrounding landscape is intertwined into the whole composition. On folding screens the central section is seen flanked to the left and right by other leaves as with a pair of six-fold screens, meaning that the viewer can delight in seeing a slightly different scene according to where the screen is viewed from. Another device for expressing space is the *ungyo-hyogen*. Misty cloud forms are used to create a sense of depth, so that in such works as narrow hanging scrolls, objects in the foreground appear at the bottom of the scroll, things in the middle distance are depicted centrally, and those parts of the composition which are furthest away from the viewer are at the top with cloud or mist apparently separating areas of the scene.

It would not be unreasonable to suppose that such methods of expressing space are a product of daily Japanese life. Sitting directly on the floor, for example, means that art works are seen from a



A "perspective picture" or *uki-e* entitled *Shin Yoshiwara* by Utagawa Toyoharu

completely different angle compared to in the West. Japanese awareness stems from the way that time and space are appreciated and pleasure is gained by being able to experience the way they are developed and modified. The degree to which feelings and emotions are preserved is, therefore, something of a national characteristic.

The kind of view of the world that is gained from inside the limited space of a tea ceremony room is rather special, although now something of a rarity. In other traditional rooms it is possible to enjoy the changes of scene which occur by opening or closing the opaque paper room dividing screens called *fusuma*, or the translucent window screens called *shoji*. As a result, this kind of appreciation of space is expressed by the aesthetically pleasing way that blank spaces are used in Japanese prints and paintings, whereas in traditional

Western art no such blanks exist.

There was, however, a degree of harmony in the way that Eastern and Western methods were combined. Methods of perspective drawing did not exist in Japan until the end of the 17th century when Western styles of expression began to be used and techniques of describing space were adopted.

Nevertheless, because established

techniques of Eastern art such as the use of cloud forms to produce a feeling of space between trees were used, realistic perspective elements were not being used to the full. The effect, however, was not at all strange. In fact, this eclectic mix produced a rather interesting composition.

Some of the first fairly convincing renderings of interiors using perspective were produced by Okumura Bunkaku Masanobu and other woodblock print artists. These *uki-e* show, however, that the



Shinban Uki-e Shinobugaoka no Zu by Utagawa Toyoharu
Shinban uki-e is a "perspective picture" printed from a "new plate," in this case a set of wooden blocks



Kudan Ushigafuchi by Katsushika Hokusai
This shows the kind of development which took place from uki-e to the rendering of landscape. Apart from the use of perspective projection, use can be seen of such things as the kind of frame employed in Western art, and shadows to produce a three-dimensional feeling.

theories behind perspective drawing had not been fully grasped and they were not being practically applied. When depicting outdoor scenes, old, well-trying methods were adopted as the theories of perspective could hardly be used to full advantage. In order to produce a feeling of depth, therefore, a layering of elements was used or a *fukanzu* produced showing a scene from an elevated position. With variations in the rendering of figures and compositional devices of the interiors, these drawings were copied and used repeatedly by any number of woodblock print artists.

Having adopted Western perspective toward the end of the Edo period (1600-1868) as part of the natural development of ukiyo-e, "perspective pictures" were an example of images using a logical



Yoshiwara Nakanomachi by Okumura Masanobu
This is a combination of an uki-e "perspective picture"—and a *beni-e*—"red-colored picture."

expression of space. They particularly show an exaggerated feeling of depth. In fact, the way that things in the foreground appear to stand out or "float" in front of those things in the distance gave them their name in a literal sense, as *uki* means to "float." According to Ishino Hiromichi in his *Esoragoto* of 1802, "Uki-e first appeared in Edo (Tokyo) at the end of the Kyoho era (1716-1736), about 70 years ago. Back then, there were those who said these pictures should be known as *kubomi-e*

("depression picture") because of the way they appear to go back into the picture plane, rather than "floating" in front of distant objects. They became very much appreciated by the population at large and now all are uki-e". The end of the Kyoho period between 1730 and 1735 was when the eighth Shogun, Tokugawa Yoshimune, was in power.

According to *Ukiyo-e Ruiko*, Masanobu credited himself with being the inventor of uki-e, a fact that can be backed up by references in other works of literature. He claimed emphatically that he was the originator of these "perspective pictures" as well as other forms of rendering including *beni-e kongen* and *hashira-e kongen*. *Kongen* means "root" or "source."

The adoption of geometric perspective projection made it possible to express a new sense of depth not found previously in conventional forms of traditional Eastern art, by using straight lines converging on a vanishing point. Such woodblock print artists as Nishimura Shigenaga and Furukawa Moromasa took up the challenge of using perspective as a way of expressing space. But one person who particularly furthered the development of uki-e was



Nozoki Megane—a "peep show—viewer"

Utagawa Toyoharu. This was some 30 to 40 years after the emergence of the first examples of uki-e. From literature of the times it seems that Toyoharu's work was described as being "splendid" and he succeeded in raising the quality of the genre. His positive attempts to come to terms with this way of expressing space are evident from the many works he produced.

Related to this subject are *megane-e*, which are pictures to be seen through a viewer with a lens. The viewer is called a *nozoki-megane*—literally "peep spectacles." This device was also called a *nozoki-karakuri* and also known as *Oranda-megane*, or Dutch spectacles. Maruyama Okyo became a well-known figure after he began selling *megane-e*, having studied Western perspective and this new way of producing a sense of depth and reality by viewing a graphic image through a lens. The use of perspective projection was an epoch-making experiment within the history of Japanese art, both in respect of being the original idea behind uki-e and *megane-e*. It was also important in the development of ukiyo-e per se and provided a new way of looking at things and appreciating them. Subsequently it was to greatly influence the kind of expression used in landscape and descriptive painting in Japan. **JTI**

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