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Visual Arts

3 takes on Japanese culture, from pottery and prints to ... sex

By Matthew Kangas
Special to The Seattle Times

Three fascinating exhibitions this month underscore the continued local interest in Japanese culture and its influences. The shows deal with Victorian-era (Meiji-period) women's novel illustrations, erotic woodcuts of the 18th and 19th centuries and wood-fired handmade pottery made by American artists in the Japanese style.

Why not take an afternoon off from holiday cooking and shopping and soak up the alternately elegant, startling and warm qualities of Japanese art?

Carolyn Staley's move from Pioneer Square to Pike Place Market should not dissuade antique print lovers and the curious from tracking her down in her new location. The gallery is a treasure trove of beautiful works on paper, focusing this month on the deceptively charming and innocent title-page illustrations of "kuchi-e," books that were Western-influenced, melodramatic novels in which put-upon, tragically abandoned heroines lose their true loves and express their deepest longings.

With the literary tradition of unrequited love leading to suicide dating back to the 10th-century "Tale of Genji," Japanese woodblock artists were already comfortable with scenes of female desire and lust. After the 1868 Meiji restoration and the opening up to the West, authors and artists soon had women smoking cigarettes; reading salacious books; and coping with strong, unfulfilled yearnings.

"Snowy Day" (1905) by Tomioka Eisen hides a young woman demurely behind an umbrella. More suggestive, "Spring Sea" (1905) by a female artist, Mizuno Toshikata, uses a young lady collecting seashells to reference sexual parts. In Eisen's "Morning Snow" (1904), two dogs copulate nearby.

"Kuchi-e" are demure compared to the prior tradition of "shunga" ("picture of spring"), examples of which are now on view at Davidson Galleries. One of the earliest art forms to be influenced by photography, "shunga" changed radically after the introduction of erotic photography into Japan. A strange mixture of soft-core entertainment, marriage manual (given by mothers to daughters) and high and low art, "shunga" best typify the completely unembarrassed, matter-of-fact Japanese attitude toward sex. Unusually large private parts are thought to have provided better instructional detail for female readers. That and the wide range of positions were meant to preclude any surprises from future husbands or lovers.

Bright and beautifully colored, participants are always fully clothed, right up to an entire suit of samurai armor. Sex was deemed to be best when spontaneous and impulsive, with a necessary resistance on the part of the female partner. Several of the prints expose tell-tale sexual symbols like curled toes, towering hairdos and blazing orange and red colors. A parental-guidance warning is posted near the entrance to this museum-quality survey.



enlarge COURTESY OF CAROLYN STALEY FINE JAPANESE PRINTS
Mizuno Toshikata's "Haru no umi" ("Spring Sea"), kuchi-e on paper, 1905, from the literary magazine Bungei Kurabu 11, No. 4.

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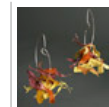
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Exhibit Reviews

"Kuchi-e," noon-5 p.m. Mondays-Fridays, through Nov. 30, Carolyn Staley Fine Japanese Prints, 2001 Western Ave., Suite 320, Seattle (206-621-1888

or www.CarolynStaleyPrints.com).

"Shunga: Erotic Japanese Prints 1780-1900," 10 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Tuesdays-

Saturdays, through Nov. 30, Davidson Galleries, 313 Occidental Ave. S., Seattle

(206-624-6700 or www.davidson galleries.com).

"Mingei Tradition in the Northwest: 8th Annual Pottery Invitational," 10 a.m.-

6 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays, through Dec. 24, Glenn Richards, 964 Denny Way, Seattle

(206-287-1877 or www.glennrichards.com).

"Mingei" translates as everyday art or Japanese folk art. Having assimilated fancier types of pottery — porcelain from China, celadon glaze from Korea — the Japanese put a premium on humble, rough and homely qualities of carved wooden implements, metal tools and "anagama" or wood-fired ceramic tableware.

Creamy brown and pink "shino" glazes join green-and-white "oribe" spatters, along with blunt red and black iron-oxide glazes on sake sets, tea sets, vases, bowls and plates at Glenn Richards. The 12 Washington and Oregon potters invited by owner John Fairman give a great boost to the Northwest's reputation for high-quality handmade pottery. They range from brilliantly subtle and unique objects to fairly slick production ware.

Mostly stoneware, the 300 or more examples on view demonstrate how each potter has his or her own style yet how they have all mastered the "anagama" kiln in their own way. Some are more original than others. Brian O'Neill's geometric vases are too derivative of British postwar potters Lucie Rie and Hans Coper. Robbie Lobell (one of three women) makes casseroles and plates with crisp, generous edges and lips.

Even better, Fairman has let each artist choose antique Japanese furniture from the gallery inventory to display his or her wares. The combination of pottery and country furniture is unbeatable. This is a holiday show not to be missed.

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