Drawing in Ukiyo-e Prints

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Abstract

This study approaches the aspects of drawing in ukiyo-e woodblock prints, which emerged in Edo period Japan (1603-1867). It is intended to investigate stylistic and historic origins of the prints along with the technical process of producing one, but the research focus will be on graphical and spatial specificities within the drawing involved. Also, there will be a brief discussion over the main topics – or “commonplaces” for expressions – depicted in the prints and a listing of Edo period’s main artists, according to renown and influence on Western art. The research covers an interview with Professor Madalena Hashimoto Cordaro, Ph.D., specialist in Japanese art and literature from the University of São Paulo.

Key words: ukiyo-e, drawing, Japanese print

Introduction

The urban development which blossomed in Edo (currently Tokyo) due to centralization of political and military power in the hands of the new shogunate in 1600 allowed a culture of esthetic appreciation of ephemeral pleasures to thrive within the brothels, kabuki theaters, sumo fights and the making of prints depicting these new subjects and way of living.

Those ukiyo-e, “pictures of the floating world”, are traditionally classified in an array of topics¹ utilized by many artists, such as: *yakusha-e*, pictures of actors; *meisho-e*, pictures of famous places (Image 1); *bijinga*, picture of beautiful persons; *shunga*, pictures of spring (a term for erotic art); and *musha-e*, pictures of samurai warriors.

From this outlook, the study aims to discuss aspects of the visual language employed in the prints, such as the use of line and color, space and form, as well as tools and techniques involved, and the specific division of labor implied (writer, artist, editor, woodcarver, printer)

Results and Discussion

Bibliographic investigation has pointed at many transformations occurred in ukiyo-e printmaking, such as the advent of the polychrome print, use of linear perspective and preferences for topics depicted, within the context of a cultural exchange with the West (mainly via Dutchmen) especially during the 19th century. Also, a few artist names became clear as of great impact in Japanese printmaking, such as Ando Hiroshige (1797-1858), Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849) and Kitagawa Utamaro (1754-1806).

After analyzing various print reproductions (such as Instituto Moreira Salles’ ukiyo-e collection) and delving into context, I could find many rhetorical resources used by the artists as to establish an often humorous dialogue with culture from other periods in Japanese history – mainly Heian (794 to 1185).

The interview with Professor Madalena developed perspectives on the use of space, line and color in the prints, as well as historical and terminology matters.

Image 1. KATSUSHIKA HOKUSAI: The Great Wave off Kanagawa. c. 1831

Conclusions

Through research, it was possible to perceive a notion of time-space (Ma) proper to Japanese Culture², materialized in a spatiality present in the arts, architecture and even social behavior, characterized by relations involving “negative space”, unlike the use of space as a limit³, typical of Western art.

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¹ CORDARO, M. N. H. (Org.) *Ukiyo-e Pinturas do Mundo Flutuante*. 1. ed. São Paulo: Instituto Moreira Salles, 2008. v. 2.

² OKANO, Michiko. MA: *Entre-Espaço da Comunicação no Japão: um estudo acerca dos diálogos entre Oriente e Ocidente*. São Paulo, 2007. 195 f. Thesis (Doctorate in Communication and Semiotics) – Pontifícia Universidade Católica – São Paulo.

³ ARGAN, Giulio Carlos. *Arte Moderna: do iluminismo aos movimentos contemporâneos*. São Paulo: Ed. Companhia das Letras, 1995, p. 639.