The Last Great Series of the *Ukiyo-e* Tradition: Tsukioka Yoshitoshi's *One Hundred Aspects of the Moon*, 1885-1892

Emma Barnett
University of Cincinnati
Art History Undergraduate
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The development of single-sheet woodblock printmaking came about during the Edo period (1603-1867) of Japan. During this period, the genre of *ukiyo-e* prints ("pictures of the floating world"), came to be recognized as among the most quintessentially Japanese of art forms.[1] The end of the Edo period came with the Meiji Restoration (1868-69), and the transition into the new Meiji period (1868-1912). With this, new artistic techniques and influences were introduced to Japan from the West; throwing Japanese artistic practices into turmoil and causing a crisis in national identity. Resulting from dramatic change, a decline in the interest of *ukiyo-e* prints emerged as mediums such as lithography and photography were gaining popularity. However, there was one artist who simultaneously maintained and revolutionized the tradition with his prints, Tsukioka Yoshitoshi (1839-1892). Throughout his career, Yoshitoshi portrayed subjects of the glorious and colorful past of Japan while incorporating his own style and interests in human emotions; something that had not previously been done in *ukiyo-e* prints. One of the last series he produced at the end of the nineteenth century epitomized his ideals and garnered him the title as the last great *ukiyo-e* master. Looking at the visual analyses of four prints from the series, in contrast to his contemporaries and the dramatically changing world around him, it becomes evident as to how Yoshitoshi managed to revitalize the cultural heritage of Japanese woodblock prints.

It was during a pivotal time in Yohsitoshi's career that the world around him drastically shifted. The Meiji Restoration in Japan was a political revolution in 1868 that brought about the end of the Tokugawa shogunate; the military government that controlled the country during the Edo period. The event consisted of a coup d'état that ousted Tokugawa Yoshinobu (the last shogun) and proclaimed the young emperor of Meiji, Mutsuhito, as ruler. The conflict ended in

[1] Matthi Forrer, Richard Kruml, Lawrence Smith, Amy Reigle Stephens, and Ellis Tinios. "Japan: Prints and books." 10.

June of 1869 and reinstated the control of Japan to imperial rule. With this restoration of power, came the subsequent era of the Meiji period and its major political, economic, and social changes which both modernized and Westernized the country of Japan.[2] It brought new views and techniques to the world of art in Japan.

Prior to this dramatic change, the world of Japanese prints had remained relatively the same since the beginning of the Edo period. For two hundred and sixty five years it was a collaborative process involving four groups of skilled craftsmen: an artist, designer, carver, and producer. There were two main themes of subject matter in early *ukiyo-e* prints, the Kabuki theater and the pleasure quarters; the addition of a third, landscapes, came later in the nineteenth century. Western influence was originally first introduced to Japanese prints around 1740 with the introduction of linear perspective. Prints that used the technique became known as *ukie* prints (‘floating pictures’ or perspective prints). Full-color printing on a single-sheet was developed by 1765 and, theoretically, allowed for an infinite number of colors to be used.[3] It was during the Kansei era (1789-1801) of the Edo period, that woodblock printing in Japan reached the pinnacle of its stylistic evolution.[4] While *ukiyo-e* prints were still widely celebrated and produced in the early nineteenth century, there was little stylistic innovation being established. The process and materials remained the same; however, the subject matter and style grew stagnant. Their decline came at the turn of the twentieth century and the death of Yoshitoshi in 1892.

Under the given name of Yonejirō, Yoshitoshi was born April 30, 1839. His father, Owariya Kinzaburō, was a merchant that bought his samurai status from the samurai family of Yoshioka Hyōbu. This practice of buying one's status to move up in the hierarchical society of

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[2] T. Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. “Meiji Restoration.” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, March 29, 2023.
[3] “Japan: Prints and books,” 24.
[4] Ibid., 30.

Tokugawa Japan was commonly accepted.[5] Not much is known about the early years of his life; what is known comes from the writings of one of his future students Yamanaka Kodō (1869-1943). It is believed that Yonejirō was the love child of his father's mistress; however, when his father brought another mistress into the house, he left to live with his uncle in Shinbashi. There are no details about him receiving an education, but based on many of the subject matters of his prints, it is evident that he had a great interest in classical Japanese literature and history. He likely attended a *terakoya*, a school for commoners, for a few years where he would have learned the basic Confucian texts and how to write.[6] In 1850, at the age of eleven, Yonejirō's uncle enrolled him in the school of Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1798-1861), one of the most successful woodblock-printmakers in Edo, Japan (modern day Tokyo). Following the tradition of students to receive the second character of their master's name as the first character of their own, Yonejirō was given the name Yoshitoshi.[7] In the eyes of the other students, Yoshitoshi was seen as "a drab little shop assistant,"[8] but was treated with special affection by Kuniyoshi; Yoshitoshi was allowed access to his master's personal collection of Western prints and etchings, which would have a lasting influence on his work. In 1861 Yoshitoshi's master Kuniyoshi died and two years later his father would as well. At this point, Yoshitoshi adopted the surname of the Tsukioka family. The first character, *tsuki*, means "moon" in Japanese. The moon as a motif would become a significant symbol in his work, specifically his series *One Hundred Aspects of the Moon*.

During the height of Yoshitoshi's artistic career, he began releasing the first prints of the series that would eventually become known as one of his greatest works. In October of 1885, he

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[5] John Stevenson, *Yoshitoshi's One Hundred Aspects of the Moon*, 11.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid., 12.
[8] Ibid.

released the first five prints from the series *One Hundred Aspects of the Moon (Tsuki hyakushi)*. The series features one hundred single-sheet woodblock prints with subjects ranging from Japanese and Chinese history, literature, and folklore. All of the prints are unrelated apart from the unifying motif of the moon that is present, or implied, in each print. As stated by John Stevenson, "In traditional Japan the moon was a beloved object of beauty and a part of daily life, and appreciation of it was an important element of Japanese aesthetics."[9] Throughout the series, Yoshitoshi pays homage to the past while also revolutionizing it. He uses a combination of artistic styles that he has learned, from Chinese landscape to the major art schools of Japan like Kanō, Tosa, Rinpa, and Shijō. Elements of these styles can be seen in the prints, often multiple being paired together according to the mood he wished to portray. The mood of each print was an important element Yoshitoshi focused on illustrating. Through the cold and silent moon that presented a sense of stillness and serenity, he was able to convey the range of human emotions.[10] With the influence of his master Kuniyoshi, Yoshitoshi abandoned the traditional style of *ukiyo-e* and used the realism of Western art to portray his figures' facial expressions, gestures, and stances. He abandoned the tradition of only depicting figures in a three quarter view and actively portrayed them from the front, side, or even from behind; whichever angle he believed fit the mood best.

The prints of the *Moon* series are categorized into four main groups: legends and folklore from the major religions of Japan, figures from the Heian court of the ninth through twelfth centuries CE, the following 400 years of war and violence, mainly based on Noh-theater tragedies from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and characters of entertainment and

[9] Ibid., 53.
[10] Ibid., 54.

literature from the period of stability under the Tokugawa shogunate (1603-1867, also known as the Edo Period).[11]

Falling under the first category of religion, Yoshitoshi's 68th print in the series, *Moon of the Southern Sea* was printed in 1888 (figure 1). The print depicts an image of the Bodhisattva Kannon, a goddess of mercy in the "Pure Land" sect of Japanese Buddhism who carried the souls of the dying to paradise. In the print, Kannon is depicted as a woman manifestation of the Indian Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara; although the original Indian form was a man. She sits on a rocky overhang above a raging sea. This is in reference to both the Southern Sea mentioned in the title and a small rocky island along the southern coast of India called Potalaka, one of Avalokitesvara's dwelling places on earth.[12] She is seated with her hands clasped around one knee in a position of "royal ease." Behind her sits a vase which holds a willow branch, an iconographic trait of the Bodhisattva that can be dated back to the tenth century. She is clad in a long white robe and adorned with various pieces of gold jewelry. The large halo behind her head mimics the form of the smaller moon that is being crossed by the dark clouds to the left. Yoshitoshi depicted the translucence of the halo by showing the characters of the cartouche appearing through it. Kannon is depicted with a calm demeanor in face of the angry waves and darkening skies. She is a figure of worship for sailors and fishermen. Yoshitoshi uses the influence of a Kanō school ink painting in this print through his abstract treatment of the rocks and the calligraphic lines of the robe and waves.

As for the second category's depiction of figures from the Heian court, Yoshitoshi's 71st print, *Ishiyama moon (Ishiyama tsuki)*, printed October 10, 1889 (figure 2), features the daughter of a dominant family at the court, the Fujiwara. Murasaki Shikibu is most notably known as the

[11] Ibid., 58.
[12] Ibid., 204.

author of "The Tale of Genji," Japan's most famous piece of literature and the world's first novel. In the print, Murasaki is sitting on a balcony leaning over a writing-desk and a blank scroll deep in thought. Typically, she is depicted looking over Lake Biwa; however, Yoshitoshi depicts her looking out at a moonlit mountain scape. The representation of the mountains is indicative of the Chinese literati style. A lantern above her head is positioned partially in front of the moon. This, along with Yoshitoshi's inclusion of the column in the foreground and disappearing mountains in the background, give the print a sense of dimensionality and depth. The coloring of the robe design was an easy pick for Yoshitoshi: *murasaki* means violet. In reference to the title, Ishiyama was a temple known to be a popular destination for Heian noblewomen, as well as the place where Murasaki was known to have worked on her novel.

The 98th print, *The moon's four strings - Semimaru (tsuki no yotsu no o – Semimaru)*, printed in August 1891 (figure 3) is based on a Noh play and therefore falls into the third category. There is only one figure depicted, and he is seated centrally in the composition. He wears both light purple and stark black clothing. He has thinning hair and an unkempt beard. Seated on the verandah of a run down cottage, he plucks at the strings of a *biwa*[13] with a plectrum. On the wooden instrument, there is a section of black wavy lines and a crescent moon that are set against a green background. The cottage's walls are cracking and wild grass grows all around; indicative of the poor and isolated location. In contrast to the state of the cottage, purple flowers bloom in the foreground. The pale gray ground transitions into the pigmented blue of the sky and the vibrant yellow of the moon, which is partially covered by the thatched roof. The man's back is turned away from the moon and his eyes closed.

[13] Japanese short-necked lute distinguished by its graceful, pear-shaped body. The *biwa* has a shallow, rounded back and silk strings (usually four or five) attached to slender lateral pegs. The instrument is played with a large wedge-shaped plectrum called a *bachi*.

Known as both a historical figure and a Noh play protagonist, Semimaru is remembered for his music and poem that was included in the *Hyakunin isshu*, "One Hundred Poems by One hundred Poets."[14] Historically, he was a blind poet and musician who served the son of Emperor Uda in the tenth century. When the prince died, he moved to a remote mountain cottage and lived out the rest of his days alone, playing the lute. In the Noh play titled after him, *Semimaru*, he is an imperial prince whose blindness results in his banishment on a mountain. While playing his lute in a straw-thatched cottage, he is reunited with his sister Sakagami, who has also been exiled, and they lament on their ill fortune together. Despite being a blind man who can't see the moon and its light, Semimaru is still attuned to the beauty through his music. Yohsitohsi has used the moon as "an ideal, a presence that can be visualized even by a blind musician."[15]

In regards to the fourth category's subject, the stability brought upon by the Tokugawa shogunate, what is thought to be the final print of the series is an example. Titled, *Since the crescent moon I have been waiting for tonight – Old man (Mikazuki no koroyori machishi koyoi kana – Okina)*, printed in 1891 (figure 4), this print features, in the foreground, three male figures; two seated on a straw mat and one standing, leaning on a wooden stick to their right. The seated men are dressed in simple patterned robes, brown and blue in color. They are seen enjoying tea and snacks. Behind them is a wooden desk that has a bamboo vase with grass and flowers next to a handful of sweet pea pods. The standing man is dressed in a white under robe that is topped with a larger brown one. He is wearing armor underneath his clothes, seen on his arms and hands, as well as what is presumably a shield strapped to his back. He is wearing a black hat and has a white travel bag in front of his chest hanging around his neck. There is a grassy landscape in the middle ground and two houses in the background, separated by a river.

[14] John Stevenson, 264.
[15] Ibid., 54.

The moon is high in the sky, central to the composition, and the gray ring around it gives a feeling of a hazy night sky.

This print is a depiction of Japan's greatest haiku poet Matsuo Bashō (1644-1694). He was born to a samurai family but abandoned them at age twenty-two and moved to a hut alongside a riverbank in Edo to write and teach poetry. He traveled often to visit the historic sites written about by earlier poets and to experience different worlds. In this depiction by Yoshitoshi, Bashō is dressed in the robes of a lay priest, the clothes he would wear on his journeys, and talking with two farmers who are celebrating the mid-autumn festival. He often referred to himself as Okina, or "Old man," and is how he can be identified in the image by the cartouche. The bony faces and blue of the beard help identify the seated men as farmers, as these were common features given to peasants and workmen in caricature prints; however, Yoshitoshi depicted them sympathetically.[16] After his long journey, Bashō is able to join the farmers in celebrating the festival under the warm light of the full moon. The purpose of haiku poems is to "crystalize moments of daily life, bringing the beauty and significance of mundane surroundings suddenly into focus."[17] This is what Yoshitoshi does in this print through the mood of the interaction between people from different backgrounds coming together to celebrate the beauty of the moon.

Each of these four prints were chosen to represent the four categories that the one hundred prints of the *Moon* series are divided into. They show Yoshitoshi's use of Western techniques like perspective, as well as his inclusion of traditional art schools like the Kanō and Chinese literati. In each of the prints, Yoshitoshi's focus is on the figures. He focuses on depicting their facial expressions to match the stories of their character. He uses his artistic style,

[16] Ibid., 268.
[17] Ibid.

like color and brush work, to display the desired mood of the print. Throughout the series, Yoshitoshi's design work is used to convey the traditional manner of *ukiyo-e* prints along with the adopted style of the West in order to reinvigorate woodblock printing in Japan.

Many printmakers were influenced by the introduction of Western art culture and adapted to the subject matter and stylistic aspects. Working at the same time as Yoshitoshi, Kobayashi Kiyochika and Kawanabe Kyōsai sought to include the West in their prints. They designed subject matters that followed the ever-changing fashions and fads of the urban scene. For example, Kiyochika's depiction of a train (figure 5), a Western invention introduced to Japan in the 1870s. He also abandoned the traditional print style outlines in favor of chromographic chiaroscuro and deep perspective in his landscapes.[18] He was the first to produce *kōsen-ga* ("light-ray pictures"), *ukiyo-e* prints that employed Western-style naturalistic light and shade.[19] In regards to the *Moon* series, Yoshitoshi contrasts his contemporaries and their inclusion of Western influence. He uses more conservative subject matters – historical figures and scenes, and stories of entertainment – but puts *ukiyo-e* back in touch with genuine emotions.[20] He focuses on the figures and how he can demonstrate the range of human emotions and apply that to the overall story and mood of the print. Through his expressive and fluid brush style, Yoshitoshi brings to life the characters and historical incidents of his prints.

Yoshitoshi's career survived the cultural shock of the shift from the Edo to Meiji period, and is undoubtedly evident in his *Moon* series. By looking at four of the one hundred prints, it is clear as to how Yoshitoshi fused Western artistic influences with traditional Japanese printmaking conventions to create his own unique visual language. His choice to mostly

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[18] Tim Clark, Review of *Yoshitoshi's Thirty Six Ghosts: A Color Album of the Supernatural by the Japanese Wood-Block Master*, by John Stevenson. *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London*, vol. 56, no. 2 (1993): 405.
[19] Julia Meech-Pekarik, *The World of the Meiji Print: Impressions of a New Civilization*, 194.
[20] Tim Clark, 405.

disregard the over two hundred years of the *ukiyo-e* tradition for a new approach to the genre is the reason as to why his prints were successful amid the growing popularity of new artistic mediums like photography. It is also the reason why Yoshitoshi is regarded as the last great *ukiyo-e* artist. Having struggled mentally for much of his life, Yoshistoshi started to lose control of his mind and was admitted to a mental hospital in 1891. He was released in 1892 and spent the next three weeks in rental homes alone in Honjō until his death on June 9 at 53 from cerebral hemorrhage. His closest student and companion, Kanaki Toshikage drew a memorial portrait of Yoshitoshi that was soon after published by Yamato newspaper along with his death poem making his death known across Japan.

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Figure 1
Tuskioka Yoshitoshi, *Moon of the Southern Sea (Nankai no tsuki*), printed 1888

Figure 2
Tsukioka Yoshitoshi, *Ishiyama moon (Ishiyama tsuki)*, printed October 10, 1888

Figure 3
Tsukioka Yoshitoshi, *The moon's four strings – Semimaru (tsuki no yotsu no o – Semimaru)*, printed August 1891

Figure 4

Tsukioka Yoshitoshi, *Since the crescent moon I have been waiting for tonight – Old man (Mikazuki no koroyori machishi koyoi kana – Okina)*, printed 1891

Figure 5

Kobayashi Kiyochika, *View of Takanawa Ushimachi under a Shrouded Moon*, 1879. Woodblock print; ink and color on paper. Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian National Museum of Asian Art, S2003.8.1180.