



Japanese Kite Paintings & Kite Prints

Throughout Japan, which has one of the world's most varied kite cultures, careful attention is paid to every step of kite making—choosing paper for the sail, shaping and securing the bamboo frame, bowing and bridling. Painting, printing, or dyeing the kite sail is also approached with great care. The design may first be sketched in charcoal, then outlined in black sumi ink, and finally filled in with bright paints or watercolors. These traditional *tako-e* or kite paintings are accorded the respect and admiration most often paid only to fine art in other cultures. Kite makers want to satisfy this expectation: as one kite maker in Shizuoka has said, "I wish to give vigor to my kites so they might be called art."



The subjects pictured on kite sails are usually *samurai* warriors, characters from the *noh* or *kabuki* theatre, or mythic heroes said to bring good luck or deter misfortune. A father might fly an image of Kintaro the Golden Boy or Momotaro the Peach Boy to ensure a son who is strong and healthy. Hanya the Demon could scare away evil doers; the Seven Gods of Good Fortune (*Shichi Fufujin*) would signal a desire for commercial success. Warriors Yoshitsune and Benkei exemplify strength and friendship. Fliers launching beautifully painted *ji-dako* or "letter kites" salute a characteristic of the ideograph painted on their sails—the power of a dragon or the force of a storm.

The same subjects, all rich in cultural associations for the Japanese, were likely to appear as well on fabrics, in tattoos, in *menko* (card games), or as toys or dolls. They also appeared in the woodblock prints for which Japan is so renowned. In fact, kite paintings and woodblock prints have shared a special synergy. Kite paintings have borrowed subjects from woodblock prints; in turn, kites themselves have often appeared

as elements in woodblock prints. The relationship between the two genres crystallized several hundred years ago during the Edo period, when Edo (now Tokyo) had the greatest population in the world.

Why was Edo so large—home to more than a million people in the eighteenth century? The *shogun* Tokugawa Ieyasu, Japan's de facto leader, had created a central government in 1600, after more than a hundred years of conflict throughout Japan. He had moved Japan's political capital to Edo from Kyoto, which was the seat of the emperor and his ceremonial power. The *shogun* mandated that regional lords—the *daimyo*—live every other year in Edo. Each lord had hundreds, or even thousands, of retainers, with whom he traveled to and from the city. The cost of these processions and of maintaining two homes sapped the resources of the *daimyos* and kept them weaker than the *shogun*. The requirements also ensured that Edo's population grew. During alternate years, when the lord returned to govern his home state, his wives and children had to remain in Edo. They served both as hostages, to guarantee the *daimyos'* good behavior, and as a permanent population base.

Edo residents created a vibrant, urban culture called "the floating world" (*ukiyo*).^{*} It was trendy, chic, and fashionable, reveling in the ever changing pleasures of daily life. Spectator sports such as *sumo* wrestling and horse racing flourished. Crowds patronized restaurants, theatres, wandering entertainers, and pleasure quarters. They followed the activities of favorite *kabuki* actors and "hostesses" with all the fervor Americans expend upon current celebrities of stage, screen, and web. And all of these enthusiasms were reflected in the woodblock prints of the time.

Where you might hang a poster of a rock band, sports star, or television celebrity in your bedroom, an Edoite would look for a woodblock print, featuring the period's equivalent of a hip hop star or the most recent "American Idol." The technique of woodblock



printing offered a new and comparatively inexpensive way to mass-produce color images. Multi-colored prints of Edo activities came to be called *ukiyo-e*, images of the floating world. Popular subjects, besides actors and *bijin* (beautiful women), included New Year's festivities and *meisho*, "beautiful scenic spots" in and around Edo. Some prints—*surimono*—were privately commissioned and distributed, to commemorate a special party or performance. The most lavish prints, which by the 1760s might require more than twenty wooden blocks to make a single impression, were *nishiki-e*, or "brocade prints." They were so named deliberately to evoke comparison with the famous brocade fabrics of Kyoto. Visitors from all over Japan sought out *nishiki-e* as souvenirs of their visit to the big city of Edo.

Because kite flying was a very popular daily or seasonal activity, kites naturally appeared in *ukiyo-e*, the print records of Edoites' common pastimes. A print might focus on kite flying at New Year's, or kites might appear as incidental details in a landscape or portrait. As is characteristic in these prints, the details of everyday objects would be carefully observed. For kites, this meant that details of framing and bridling are accurately represented.

The development of woodblock printing also happened to coincide with a kite mania, which swept through Edo during the period and spread from there throughout Japan. Kites became a popular, lightweight, inexpensive souvenir for travelers to take home to their villages. The kite mania was so severe that it distracted the public from what the government considered its appropriate concerns. For example, shopkeepers flew kites from their doorways instead of tending to their customers. The government therefore tried to restrict where and when kites could be flown. In 1656 the government prohibited kites from being flown "by children in urban thoroughfares" and from being made "for commercial purposes." Other laws targeted the size of kites because large kites were injuring people and damaging their property and crops. In the 1780s, laws banned lavish decoration of kites—and of prints and clothing as well. But, for the most part, anti-authoritarian Edoites ignored these prohibitions and delighted in flying their kites over the houses of nobles.



Kite makers responding to the continuing demand for new kites turned to woodblock prints for inspiration in decorating their kite sails. The same colors and images that appeared in *ukiyo-e* could easily be used on the typical Edo kite, which was rectangular, a shape that first appeared around 1716. Faces of actors and military heroes glowered from the skies. One well-known print shows kites above the theatre district in Edo. Each kite was painted with the face of a *kabuki* actor, and the kites competed as fiercely in the sky as the actors did on stage. A similar print was named "Kabuki Stars Rising in Popularity Like Kites": the popularity of kite flying mirrored the popularity of theatre going.

Eventually, the political and economic stability of the Edo period disintegrated. A renowned print (from Osaka rather than Edo) shows "Today's Rising Kites." Instead of an ideograph for luck, strength, or beauty, each kite sports the *kanji* for a household service or item, such as tea or *tabi*. Prices are rising, just like the kites. The print was made just two years before the Meiji restoration, by which time half of Edo's population had deserted the city.



Designs from Edo times still adorn Japanese kites today. As one visiting kite artist, Pierre Fabre, has remarked, "all the professional kitemakers I met were making kites that replicated kites

designed between 200 and 400 years ago." While there are Japanese kite



makers producing contemporary art kites, Fabre says, "The Japanese treat traditional activities with respect and reverence....The impression one gets is that the older a design, the more valuable and respected it is." He acknowledges "the pleasure of perpetuating an old and famous tradition, of being the link in a long chain that keeps the past alive." Whether you choose to decorate your kite sail with calligraphy, an image from Japanese folklore, or an up-to-the-minute "idol portrait," may you experience the same pleasure by participating in one of Japan's signature artistic traditions.

*The term *ukiyo* [*uki* = suffering, and *yo* = world] first signified a Buddhist attitude toward the impermanence of life and a recommended detachment from the suffering too much attachment could cause. But in Edo the word *uki*, pronounced in the same way, took on associations of "floating" and "buoyant" and came to signify all the fleeting pleasures at the disposal of city dwellers. This new attitude was most memorably characterized by Asai Ryōi, in *Ukiyo monogatari* (Tales of the Floating World) in 1661: "Living only for the moment, turning our full attention to the pleasures of the moon, the snow, the cherry blossoms and the maple leaves; singing songs, drinking wine, diverting ourselves in just floating, floating; caring not a whit for the pauperism staring us in the face, refusing to be disheartened, like a gourd floating along with the river current: this is what we call the Floating World (translation by Richard Lane, in *Edo: Art in Japan 1615-1868* by Robert T. Singer).

Sources

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