

Woodblock Shimbun

Brought to you by the Mokuhankan print shop in Asakusa, Tokyo

All the print news that fits!

Featured print in this issue:

Matsushima

by Tsuchiya Koitsu (1879-1949)

Designed: 1938

Size: 28 cm x 21 cm

Edition: current printing from original block set

Printer: Ayumi Ohashi

Price: 15,000 yen

Until fairly recently, the name of woodblock print designer **Tsuchiya Koitsu** was unknown outside the community of *shin-hanga* fans and knowledgeable collectors, but with the publication a few years ago of a major collection of his work in 'catalogue raisonné' form, his position in the field has become far more widely known.

Shin-hanga was a genre of woodblock prints that flourished in Japan in the first half of the 20th century. It had arisen - primarily under the artistic direction of



Shozaburo Watanabe, proprietor of a famous print shop of the era - as a system to make use of the centuries old Japanese woodblock traditions, particularly the tradition of making prints through collaborative efforts. Unlike many of the modern artists of the day, who - under the influence of western ideas - rejected the use of professional craftsmen in favour of self-produced work, Watanabe and his compatriots very much wanted to create work that made the best use of the skills of such craftsmen.

When it came to the themes to be depicted in these new prints, the major topics of the old *ukiyo-e* - kabuki actors, beautiful women, nature scenes, and landscapes - were all reworked in modern fashion, but among these it was the Japanese landscape that became the single most popular theme of the genre. Landscape particularly suits the production





The key block

methods of shin-hanga printmaking, as we can clearly see in this image. In place of the flat tones surrounded by black outlines that typifies most of the old ukiyo-e, shin-hanga dispenses with most of the outlines, and the flat tone is replaced by colouring applied in gradations (*bokashi*). The image we have here is absolutely 'classic' shin-hanga, with gradations from top and bottom providing framing for the picturesque scene at the center.

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Our edition of this print has a very special provenance; partly explained by the cartouche embossed in the left margin. It reads:



We replaced the old (and very poorly done) shimming (L) with new, clean inserts (R) ...

- Asakusa Mokuhankan
- Doi Hangaten
- Carver: Harada
- Printer: Ohashi

'Asakusa Mokuhankan' is of course our own business here, but why are we also crediting the 'Doi Hangaten'? Because the set of woodblocks we have used to make this edition belongs to them. It's a bit of a long story!

Back in the 1920s, **Doi Sadaichi** began selling woodblock prints in Tokyo, at first mostly ukiyo-e and reproductions. As the shin-hanga movement gathered momentum he decided to begin publishing prints of that type too, working at first with Kawase Hasui and then Tsuchiya Koitsu. The business flourished during the 1930s, and they sent prints all over the world, but WWII put an end to their activities. The woodblocks were removed from Tokyo for safety, and although Doi-san must have expected to resume business after





Ayumi-san of course kept careful notes on all her work; this will be invaluable for the next printer who works on these blocks ...

the war, this was not to be, as he passed away in 1945.

His son Eiichi took the reins, resuming business activity in 1948. Some of the old woodblocks were useable as they were, but others had become worn and had to be recarved. (Fanatic collectors spend great efforts trying to distinguish between all the different editions of the prints, both pre and post-war.)

Eiichi-san was never in good health though, and after he passed away, his wife made efforts to continue the business. She and her daughter Eiko-san did what they could to continue publishing prints, but without specialized knowledge of the field this was difficult, and in recent years activities of the company have ground to a halt.

This is where Mokuhankan has stepped in. The Doi family can supply the blocks, and Mokuhankan can supply the remaining pieces of the puzzle: knowledgeable direction from owner Dave Bull and associate Toshikazu Doi (publisher of the aforementioned catalogue raisonné), a team of young and enthusiastic printers, and the shop and network to distribute the finished prints. So in early 2016, the collaboration began, and the print you see here is one of the initial productions.

The carver referenced above (Harada Kametaro) worked for the Doi Company in the immediate post-war period both carving new blocks for them, and producing new ones to replace those that had become too worn to use.

The printer - Ohashi - is the new name of young Ayumi Miyashita (just married), who has been training here at Mokuhankan since the spring of 2012, and who has progressed very rapidly indeed, as you can see from this print!

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Five pieces of wood are used for this design, with multiple zones carved on each of the ten faces. A total of 21 impressions were necessary, taking Ayumi-san weeks of work. The blocks were in 'fair' condition,



at least when compared to some of the other old Doi Company blocks, and only a few small repairs were necessary here and there. A previous printer had inserted some shims very roughly, so these had to be replaced, and we had to insert a few new ones in places to adjust the registration on blocks that had shrunk slightly. Ayumi-san had to give one of the blocks a good long 'bath' before using it, in order to let it absorb water and swell out to the dimension necessary for printing accurately.

We here at Mokuhankan are very happy to be able to bring such an image back to life. It's such a win-win situation all around: old Doi-san would be hugely happy to know that his efforts so many years ago are still bearing fruit; the designer Koitsu would of course be thrilled about another generation of people enjoying his designs; our young printers are getting priceless experience in making 'shin-hanga' prints, and of course, Mokuhankan itself is broadening its base, and becoming slowly ever more stable as an organization.

Thank you for your interest in our work! ●

Also available from Mokuhankan and Doi Hangaten:



Kamigamo Shrine in Kyoto



Production of the print was documented in a comprehensive series of videos on YouTube, including step-by-step sequences of the entire printing process. Search there for "Mokuhankan Doi Hanga" to find them ...

Mokuhankan

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