Strike a Pose
Kabuki Theater Prints from the Dominique H. Vasseur Collection

ORGANIZED BY KEVIN R. E. GREENWOOD,
JOAN L. DANFORTH CURATOR OF ASIAN ART

ALLEN MEMORIAL ART MUSEUM, SPRING 2022
Imagine a form of theater that combines the music, dance, and spectacle of grand opera or Broadway with the drama, action, and excitement of a Hollywood blockbuster. Then set it in 19th-century Japan and you have the world of kabuki theater seen in this exhibition. Unlike earlier Japanese dramatic forms intended for elite patrons, kabuki arose from the vibrant, urban popular culture of the Edo period (1603–1868). With sumptuous sets, extravagant costumes and makeup, evocative music and dance, and sophisticated special effects, kabuki appealed to a wide audience. Restrictions in the mid-17th century, like those in Shakespeare’s England, limited kabuki to male actors only. Kabuki actors could adopt a succession of stage names, changing them at important points in their careers and sometimes inheriting a name. For example, the actor named in one print as Kawarasaki Gonjūrō I is seen in later prints as Ichikawa Danjūrō IX. The IX indicates he was the ninth actor to hold that name. He is seen here in both male and female roles.

These colorful, mass-produced woodblock prints were made to advertise kabuki plays and to exalt the actors who appeared in them. They capture memorable scenes from the performances, moments of high drama, and the often exaggerated poses known as mie, in which an actor freezes to emphasize a powerful emotion. Strike a Pose presents works by the two best known and most prolific creators of kabuki prints in the 19th century: Utagawa Kunisada I, who, like a kabuki actor, had his own name change to Utagawa Toyokuni III, and his student Toyohara Kunichika. Arranged in roughly chronological order, the prints here reveal the dazzling world of kabuki from the late 1830s to the late 1890s.

The museum thanks Dominique H. Vasseur ’73, whose promised gift of his collection of Japanese woodblock prints made this exhibition possible.

— Kevin R. E. Greenwood, Joan L. Danforth Curator of Asian Art
Utagawa Kunisada I 初代目歌川国貞
(Japanese, 1786–1865)
Ichikawa Ebizō V as the
Rokujūrokubu Pilgrim
Myōzan, actually Kagekiyo,
1838
Color woodblock print
(nishiki-e); ink and color on
paper; vertical ōban
Promised Gift of Dominique H. Vasseur
(oc 1973), TL32.2020.98

LEFT: Utagawa Kunisada I
初代目歌川国貞
(Japanese, 1786–1865)
Ichikawa Danzō V as the
Rokujūrokubu Pilgrim (Junrei)
Jirozō, actually Shigetada, 1838
Color woodblock print
(nishiki-e); ink and color on
paper; vertical ōban
Promised Gift of Dominique H. Vasseur
(oc 1973), TL32.2020.97

ABOVE: Utagawa Kunisada I
初代目歌川国貞
(Japanese, 1786–1865)
Iwai Tojaku I possibly in a role
from the play Fude Hajime
Mazebari Soga, 1838
Color woodblock print
(nishiki-e); ink and color on
paper; vertical ōban
Promised Gift of Dominique H. Vasseur

LEFT: Utagawa Kunisada I
初代目歌川国貞
(Japanese, 1786–1865)
The Ofuji Restaurant and
the Furukawa River at Hiroo:
Bandō Mitsugorō III as
Kitsune Tadanobu, from the
series Famous Restaurants of
the Eastern Capital, 1852
Color woodblock print
(nishiki-e); ink and color on
paper; vertical ōban
Promised Gift of Dominique H. Vasseur
(oc 1973), TL32.2020.17

ABOVE: Utagawa Kunisada I
初代目歌川国貞
(Japanese, 1786–1865)
The Tagasode Restaurant:
Actor Iwai Kumesaburō III as
Yaoya Oshichi, from the
series Famous Restaurants of
the Eastern Capital, 1853
Color woodblock print
(nishiki-e); ink and color on
paper; vertical ōban
Promised Gift of Dominique H. Vasseur
(oc 1973), TL32.2020.87

LEFT: Utagawa Kunisada I
初代目歌川国貞
(Japanese, 1786–1865)
Ichikawa Ebizō V as the
Rokujūrokubu Pilgrim (Junrei)
Jirozō, actually Shigetada, 1838
Color woodblock print
(nishiki-e); ink and color on
paper; vertical ōban
Promised Gift of Dominique H. Vasseur
(oc 1973), TL32.2020.97

ABOVE: Utagawa Kunisada I
初代目歌川国貞
(Japanese, 1786–1865)
Ichikawa Danzō V as the
Rokujūrokubu Pilgrim (Junrei)
Jirozō, actually Shigetada, 1838
Color woodblock print
(nishiki-e); ink and color on
paper; vertical ōban
Promised Gift of Dominique H. Vasseur
(oc 1973), TL32.2020.97

ABOVE: Utagawa Kunisada I
初代目歌川国貞
(Japanese, 1786–1865)
The Sokarō Restaurant:
Actor Iwai Hanshirō VII as
Orie, from the series Famous
Restaurants of the Eastern
Capital, 1852
Color woodblock print
(nishiki-e); ink and color on
paper; vertical ōban
Promised Gift of Dominique H. Vasseur
(oc 1973), TL32.2020.77

ABOVE: Utagawa Kunisada I
初代目歌川国貞
(Japanese, 1786–1865)
Iwai Tojaku I possibly in a role
from the play Fude Hajime
Mazebari Soga, 1838
Color woodblock print
(nishiki-e); ink and color on
paper; vertical ōban
Promised Gift of Dominique H. Vasseur

ABOVE: Utagawa Kunisada I
初代目歌川国貞
(Japanese, 1786–1865)
The Sokarō Restaurant: Actor
Iwai Hanshirō VII as Orie, from the
series Famous Restaurants of the Eastern Capital, 1852
Color woodblock print
(nishiki-e); ink and color on
paper; vertical ōban
Promised Gift of Dominique H. Vasseur
(oc 1973), TL32.2020.77
Utagawa Kunisada I
初代目歌川国貞
(Japanese, 1786–1865)
Miyagino (R), Shinobu, and
Daikokuya Sōroku in an inset
(L), from the play Go Taiheiki
Shiraishi Banashi, 1858
Color woodblock print
(nishiki-e); ink and color on
paper; ōban diptych
Promised Gift of Dominique H. Vasseur
(OC 1973), TL32.2020.113

Utagawa Kunisada I
初代目歌川国貞
(Japanese, 1786–1865)
Onoe Kikugorō IV as
Mitsuhide’s Daughter
(Musume) Kikyō, Seki Sanjūrō
Ill as Onishi Yukinaga (R),
and Bandō Hikosaburō IV as
Mashiba Hisayoshi with an
inset of Nakamura Fukusuke
I as Sutewakamaru (L), from
the play Konoshita Kage
Masago No Datezome 1855
Color woodblock print
(nishiki-e); ink and color on
paper; ōban diptych
Promised Gift of Dominique H. Vasseur
(OC 1973), TL32.2020.192 A-B

TOP: Utagawa Kunisada I
初代目歌川国貞
(Japanese, 1786–1865)
The characters Hakata no
Kojorō (R) and Kezori Kuemon
(L) in the play Hakata no
Kojorō Namimakura from the
series Eight views of Shiranui,
1861
Color woodblock print
(nishiki-e); ink and color on
paper; vertical ōban diptych
Promised Gift of Dominique H. Vasseur
(OC 1973), TL32.2020.49

ABOVE: Utagawa Kunisada I
初代目歌川国貞
(Japanese, 1786–1865)
Ichikawa Kodanji IV as
Ichikawa Goemon (R) and
Ichikawa Ichizō Ill as Iwaki
Tōmanojō (L), from the play
Zōho Futatsu-domoe, 1861
Color woodblock print
(nishiki-e); ink and color on
paper; ōban diptych
Promised Gift of Dominique H. Vasseur
(OC 1973), TL32.2020.824 A-B
Toyohara Kunichika 豊原国周
(Japanese, 1835–1900)
Bandō Hikosaburō V as Ōboshi Yuranosuke (top) and Kawarazaki Gonjurō I as Ōboshi Rikiya, 1863
Color woodblock print (nishiki-e); ink and color on paper; ōban diptych

Toyohara Kunichika 豊原国周
(Japanese, 1835–1900)
Sawamura Tanosuke III as Sodayū’s Daughter Kakezara and Nakamura Shikan IV as Kongōjin Jōroku in the play Ichiban Norime Iki no Sashimono, 1865
Color woodblock print (nishiki-e); ink and color on paper; ōban diptych
Promised Gift of Dominique H. Vasseur (OC 1973), TL32.2020.100

Toyohara Kunichika 豊原国周
(Japanese, 1835–1900)
Kawarazaki Gonjurō I as Minbu, 1865
Color woodblock print (nishiki-e); ink and color on paper; vertical ōban

Toyohara Kunichika 豊原国周
(Japanese, 1835–1900)
Kawarazaki Gonjurō I as Samezaya Shiroza, no. 4 from an untitled set of ten, 1865
Color woodblock print (nishiki-e); ink and color on paper; vertical ōban
Toyohara Kunichika (Japanese, 1835–1900)
Bandō Hikosaburō V as Osono, the Daughter of Ichimisai, in the play Katakiuchi chikai no Hikosan, from an untitled series of twenty-two actor portraits, 1873
Color woodblock print (nishiki-e); ink and color on paper; vertical ōban

Toyohara Kunichika (Japanese, 1835–1900)
Nakamura Shikan IV as Hakamadare Yasusuke in the play Ichiharano no Danmari, 1870
Color woodblock print (nishiki-e); ink and color on paper; right sheet of an ōban triptych

ABOVE: Toyohara Kunichika (Japanese, 1835–1900)
Sawamura Tosshō II as Seitakabō (R), Nakamura Shikan IV as Shirabyōshi Hanako (C), and Nakamura Nakazō III as Kongara-bō, with inset of Ichikawa Sadanji I as Kanawa Gorō (L), in the play Musume Dōjōji, 1870
Color woodblock print (nishiki-e); ink and color on paper; ōban triptych
Promised Gift of Dominique H. Vasseur (OC 1973), TL32.2020.70

RIGHT: Toyohara Kunichika (Japanese, 1835–1900)
Onoe Kikugorō V (Baikō), from the series One Hundred Roles of Baikō, 1894
Color woodblock print (nishiki-e); ink and color on paper; vertical ōban
Promised Gift of Dominique H. Vasseur (OC 1973), TL32.2020.4
ABOVE: Toyohara Kunichika 豊原国周
(Japanese, 1835–1900)
Ichikawa Sadanji I as Gihei (R), Sawamura Tosshō II as Kan Shōjū (C), and Arashi Rikaku as Terukuni (L) in the play Sugawara Denju Tenarai Kagami, 1871
Color woodblock print (nishiki-e); ink and color on paper; ōban triptych
Promised Gift of Dominique H. Vasseur (oc 1973), TL32.2020.72 a-c

LEFT: Toyohara Kunichika 豊原国周
(Japanese, 1835–1900)
Ichikawa Danjūrō IX as Ōboshi Yuranosuke, from the series One Hundred Roles of Ichikawa Danjūrō IX, 1898
Color woodblock print (nishiki-e); ink and color on paper; vertical ōban

Toyouhara Kunichika 豊原国周
(Japanese, 1835–1900)
Ichikawa Danjūrō IX as Ōboshi Yuranosuke, from the series One Hundred Roles of Ichikawa Danjūrō IX, 1898
Color woodblock print (nishiki-e); ink and color on paper; vertical ōban