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Nagasaki Prints and Early Copperplates

Masanobu Hosono

translated and adapted by Lloyd R. Craighill

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Includes index.

- 1. Color prints, Japanese—Japan—Nagasaki.
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1912. 4. Color prints, Japanese—Occidental

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CONTENTS

Table of Japanese Art Periods	
List of Illustrations	
Introduction	
by Lloyd R. Craighill	13
1 The New and Different	17
2 The Southern Barbarians	20
3 Foreign Culture and the Port of Nagasaki	26
4 Nagasaki Woodblock Prints	32
5 Hiraga Gennai	58
6 Shiba Kōkan	66
7 Aōdō Denzen	90
8 Denzen's Successors and Western-style	
Woodcut Masters	122
Conclusion	146
Notes	147
Copperplate Printmaking	
List of Illustrations in Japanese	
Glossary	
Bibliography	
Index	

Japanese Art Periods

Prehistoric		-537
Asuka		538-644
Nara		645-781
Hakuhō	645-710	
Tempyō	711–81	
Heian		782-1184
Jōgan	782-897	
Fujiwara	898-1184	
Kamakura		1185-1332
Nambokuchō		1333-91
Muromachi		1392-1572
*Momoyama		1573-99
*Edo		1600-1867

Note: This table has been provided by the Agency for Cultural Affairs of the Japanese Government. Periods marked with an asterisk are described in the Glossary.

ILLUSTRATIONS

- 1. Nest of wooden boxes (hangijūbako). Detail.
- 2-4. A Dutch Mission Paying Obeisance (Orandajin hairei zukan). Handscroll.
- 5. Virgin and Child (Seibo-shi zō); produced at a Japanese seminary by Western missionaries. Copperplate engraving.
- 6. View of Nagasaki Harbor (Nagasaki kaikō zu); attributed to Maruyama Ōkyo. Ink and colors on silk
- 7-8. Flowers in an Urn (Heika-zu), by Mōkō and Tairō Ishikawa. Copy. With encomium (gasan). Ink and colors on paper.
- 9. A Depiction of All the Peoples of the World (Bankoku jimbutsu zu). Block print with tempera colors added.
- 10. A Map of All the Nations of the World (Bankoku sōzu). Block print with tempera colors added.
- 11. Picture of a Dutchman (Orandajin no zu). Woodblock print with colors added.
- 12. Ships (Gunsen-zu). Dutch copperplate etching with colors added.
- 13. Ships (Gunsen-zu), by Aōdō Denzen. Pen and ink drawing.
- 14. A Greenlander and the Haven of Rotterdam (Gurīnlandojin to Rotterudamu-kō). Dutch copperplate engraving.
- 15. Dutch Ship (Orandasen). Copperplate engraving produced in Rotterdam.
- 16. Woman of Holland (Oranda nyonin). Woodblock print with colors added. C. 1760.
- 17. Nagasaki (Nagasaki-zu). Woodblock print. 1778.
- 18. Nagasaki (Nagasaki-zu). Woodblock print. 1802.
- 19. A Comprehensive View of Yokosuka (Yokosuka ichiranzu). Woodblock print.
- 20. The Ten-Thousand-Year Bridge in Soochow (Koso Mannenkyō zu). Soochow New Year's print.
- 21. Dutchmen Feasting and Drinking (Ranjin shuen zu); design attributed to Hayashi Shihei. Woodblock print.
- 22. Dutchman with a Black Boy from Batavia (Orandajin Jagatara-kurombō). Woodblock print.
- 23. Ostrich (Fire-Eating Bird) (Dachō [hikui tori]). Woodblock print.
- 24. Women of Holland (Oranda-fujin no zu). Woodblock print.
- 25. Picture of Kyushu (Kyūshū-e zu). Woodblock print.
- 26. View of Nagasaki Harbor (Nagasaki-kō zu). Woodblock print.
- 27. View of Nagasaki Harbor (Nagasaki-kō zu). Woodblock print.
- 28. Portrait of Russians on a State Occasion (Roshia seigi shashinkagami). Woodblock print.
- 29. Evening Glow (Sekishō), by Isono Bunsai. Woodblock print.
- 30. Curfew Bells (Banshō), by Isono Bunsai. Woodblock print.
- 31. Picture of a Woman from Batavia (Kurombō-onna no zu). Woodblock print.
- 32. Dutch Ships in Nagasaki (Orandasen-zu), by Isono Bunsai. Woodblock print.
- 33. Chinese Junk Entering the Harbor (Tosen nyūshin zu). Woodblock print.
- 34. Arrival of Vice Admiral Putiatin in Nagasaki (Batteirano-zu). Woodblock print.
- 35. "The Eight-Sector Circle" (hachibun-no-ichi no zu). Leaf from Satake Shozan's Shaseichō (Album of Representational Drawings).

- 36. "The Law of Perspective when Looking Down" (rin no zu), "The Law of Perspective when Looking up" (bō no zu). Leaf from Satake Shozan's Shaseichō (Album of Representational Drawings).
- 37. "Diagram of Viewing from Above" (rin no hō), "Diagram of Viewing from Below" (bō no hō). Leaf from Satake Shozan's Shaseichō (Album of Representational Drawings).
- 38. "Diagram of a Spiral Staircase" (rasenkaidan no zu). Unpublished leaf from Satake Shozan's Shaseichō (Album of Representational Drawings).
- 39. "Diagram of the Human Body: Woman" (fujin shintai no zu). Woodblock print. From Morishima Chūryō's Kōmō zatsuwa (A European Miscellany).
- 40-43. European copperplate engravings. From Satake Shozan's *Shaseichō* (Album of Representational Drawings).
- 44. Engraving by Georg Hertel based on a painting by F. X. Haberman.
- 45. Landscape with Lake and Mountains (Kozan fūkei zu), by Satake Shozan. Colors on paper.
- 46. Vulture Peak (Ryōjusen-zu), by Shiba Kōkan. Woodblock print.
- 47. "Vulture Peak" (*Ryōjusen-zu*), by Shiba Kōkan. Woodblock print. From Morishima Chūryō's *Kōmō zatsuwa* (A European Miscellany).
- 48. Enjoying Cool Air on a Veranda Platform (Endai no suzumi), by Shiba Kōkan. Woodblock print.
- 49. Beautiful Woman on a Second-Story Balcony (Rōjō enhashi no bijin), by Shiba Kōkan. Woodblock print.
- 50. View from Mimeguri Shrine (Mimeguri-zu), by Shiba Kōkan. Copperplate etching.
- 51. Papa's Tea Shop in Hiroo (Hiroo oyaji chaya), by Shiba Kōkan. Copperplate etching with colors added.
- 52. Shinobazu Lake (Shinobazu-no-ike), by Shiba Kōkan. Copperplate etching with colors added.
- 53. View of Ochanomizu (Ochanomizu no zu), by Shiba Kōkan. Copperplate etching.
- 54. Ryōgoku Bridge (Ryōgokubashi no zu), by Shiba Kōkan. Copperplate etching.
- 55. View of Mount Tsukuba from Mimeguri Shrine (Mimeguri no kei), by Shiba Kōkan. Copperplate etching with colors added.
- 56. Cool of Evening at Nakasu (Nakasu yūsuzumi zu), by Shiba Kōkan. Copperplate etching.
- 57. The Serpentine in Hyde Park (Sāpentain-ike zu), by Shiba Kōkan. Copperplate etching.
- 58. View of a Sanatorium (Ryōyōin no zu), by Shiba Kōkan. Copperplate etching.
- 59. View of Mount Fuji from Yabe in Suruga Province (Sunshū Yabe Fuji), by Shiba Kōkan. Copperplate etching.
- 60. Waka-no-ura on the Kii Peninsula (Kishū Waka-no-ura), by Shiba Kōkan. Copperplate etching with colors added.
- 61-65. Perspective studies from Gerard de Lairesse's Groot Schilderboek (Great Painter's Book).
- 66. A view of Mount Fuji from Yabe in Suruga Province. Two pages from Shiba Kōkan's Saiyū nikki (Journal of a Visit to the West).
- 67. Sketch of a Dutchman. Two pages from Shiba Kōkan's Saiyū nikki (Journal of a Visit to the West)
- 68. Scenes of Whaling (Hogei zukan), by Shiba Kōkan. Handscroll.
- 69. Ships Entering Port beneath the Colossus of Rhodes (Rokosutō minato kōmōsen nyūshin no zu), by Utagawa Kunitora. Woodblock print.
- 70–71. Front and back covers of Kyōjirushi komonchō (Kyoto-style Fine Patterns).
- 72–73. Pages from the Kyōjirushi komonchō (Kyoto-style Fine Patterns).

- 74. Painting of a Fisherman (Gyofu-zu), by Gessen. Ink and colors on paper.
- 75. Painting of a Farmer (Nōfu-zu), by Gessen. Ink and colors on paper.
- 76. Han-shan and Shih-de (Kanzan Jittoku zu), by Gessen. Ink and colors on paper.
- 77-78. Koto and Flute Ensemble (Dankin suidōshō zu), by Aōdō Denzen. Ink and colors on paper.
- 79-80. Nighthawk (Yotaka-zu), by Aōdō Denzen. Ink and colors on silk.
- 81. Impressions from two seals used by Aōdō Denzen.
- 82. Horse (Eiba-zu), by Aōdō Denzen. Engraving on a bronze mirror.
- 83. Pages illustrating etching and engraving implements. From the *Kōmō zatsuwa* (A European Miscellany), by Morishima Chūryō.
- 84–85. Examples of Aōdō Denzen's engraved illustrations for the *Ihan teikō* (The Essentials of Medical Instruction), by Udagawa Shinsai.
- 86. Engraved frontispiece, by Arai Reikyō. From the *Ihan teikō* (The Essentials of Medical Instruction), by Udagawa Shinsai.
- 87. View of a City Square in Germany (Zerumania kakuchū no zu), by Aōdō Denzen. Copperplate etching.
- 88. The Ruins of Ancient Rome (Rōmakoku in okeru daikannaiseki no zu). Copperplate engraving produced in London.
- 89. Cover for Shakahassō Yamato bunko (The Eight Great Events: Japanese Edition); designed by Utagawa Kunisada. Woodblock print.
- 90. Fransca Cathedral in Holland (Oranda Furansuka no garan no zu); attributed to Utagawa Kunitora. Woodblock print.
- 91. Monument to the Poet Bashō by Ōkuma Cascade (Ōkuma-no-taki Bashō-hi), by Aōdō Denzen. Copperplate etching.
- 92. Revised Map of the World (Shintei bankoku zenzu), by Aōdō Denzen. Copperplate etching.
- 93. View of the Mimeguri Shrine (Mimeguri-zu), by Aōdō Denzen. Copperplate etching.
- 94. Main Entrance to the Yoshiwara District (Yoshiwara daimonguchi), by Aōdō Denzen. Copperplate etching.
- 95. View from Mount Atago (Atagoyama chōbō no zu), by Aōdō Denzen. Copperplate etching.
- 96. Fish Market at Nihonbashi (Nihonbashi gyokaku zu), by Aōdō Denzen. Copperplate etching.
- 97. View of Shinobazu Lake from the Ōzuchiya (Ōzuchiya-kōrō yori Shinobazu-no-ike nozomu zu), by Aōdō Denzen. Copperplate etching.
- 98. Firing Tiles at Imado (Imado kawarayaki zu), by Aōdō Denzen. Copperplate etching.
- 99. View of the Confucian Academy from Kandabashi (Kandabashi yori seidō o nozomu), by Aōdō Denzen. Copperplate etching.
- 100. View of the Mannen and Ōhashi Bridges (Mannen Ōhashi ryōdobashi shōkei), by Aōdō Denzen. Copperplate etching.
- 101. View of Suidō Bridge from Surugadai (Surugadai yori Suidōbashi chōbō), by Aōdō Denzen. Copperplate etching.
- 102. Scene in the Shin'yoshiwara on the Night of the Niwaka Festival (Shin'yoshiwara no yoru niwaka no zu), by Aōdō Denzen. Copperplate etching.
- 103. Map of All the Famous Places of the Eastern Capital (Tōto meisho zenzu), by Aōdō Denzen. Copperplate etching.
- 104. View of Mitsumata (Mitsumata no kei), by Aōdō Denzen. Copperplate etching.
- 105. Shrine of Benten at Suzaki (Suzaki benten), by Aōdō Denzen. Copperplate etching.

10

- 106. Low Tide at Shinagawa (Shinagawa shiohi), by Aōdō Denzen. Copperplate etching.
- 107. Dike at Yoshiwara (Yoshiwara dote no kei), by Aōdō Denzen. Copperplate etching.
- 108. View of Enokizaka (Enokizaka no zu), by Aōdō Denzen. Copperplate etching.
- 109. Approach to Eitai Bridge (Eitaibashi no zu), by Aōdō Denzen. Copperplate etching.
- 110. Ryōgoku Bridge (Ryōgokubashi), by Aōdō Denzen. Copperplate etching.
- 111. Scene at Shinobazu Lake (Shinobazu no kei), by Aōdō Denzen. Copperplate etching.
- 112-13. A paper bag used as a wrapper for a set of souvenir prints by Aōdō Denzen and the woodblock used for printing the cover design.
- 114. View of Sensō-ji on Mount Kinryū (Kinryūzan Sensō-ji no zu), by Aōdō Denzen. Copperplate etching.
- 115. View of Mimeguri Shrine (Mimeguri no zu), by Aōdō Denzen. Copperplate etching.
- 116. Scene on Mount Kinryū (Dainihon Kinryūzan no zu), by Aōdō Denzen. Copperplate etching.
- 117. Scene in the Tea Pavilion on Mount Atago (Atagoyama chaya zu), by Aōdō Denzen. Copperplate etching.
- 118. View Southward along the Sumida River (Sumidagawa yori bōnan no zu), by Aōdō Denzen. Copperplate etching.
- 119. View of a Western Park (Seiyō kōen no zu), by Aōdō Denzen. Copperplate etching.
- 120. The Queen of Spain Granting an Audience to Columbus (Isupaniakoku nyotei Korombusu inken no zu), by Aōdō Denzen. Copperplate etching.
- 121. Signboard that hung in front of a shop selling souvenir etchings by Aōdō Denzen.
- 122. Dragon in the Clouds (Unryū-zu), by Aōdō Denzen. Copperplate etching.
- 123. Handbag of basketwork and cloth. Cloth design from an etching by Aōdō Denzen.
- 124. Violin (Buaiorin no zu), by Aōdō Denzen. Copperplate etching.
- 125. A kimono undercollar (han'eri) printed from an etching plate made by Aōdō Denzen.
- 126. Aōdō Denzen's version of the title page of a Dutch publication. Copperplate etching.
- 127. Sparrows and Ripened Ears of Rice (Inaho ni suzume), by Aōdō Denzen. Copperplate etching.
- 128. Exact Depiction of Tsukudajima (Tsukudajima shinkei zu), by Aōdō Denzen. Copperplate etching with colors added.
- 129. View of Ryōgoku (Ryōgoku shōkei zu), by Aōdō Denzen. Copperplate etching.
- 130. Festivities at Shijōgawara (Shijōgawara-zu), by Maruyama Ōkyo. Woodblock print with colors added.
- 131. Archery at the Sanjūsangen-dō (Sanjūsangen-dō tōshiya zu), by Maruyama Ōkyo. Woodblock print with colors added.
- 132. View from Kiyomizu-dera (Kiyomizu-dera), by Maruyama Ōkyo. Woodblock print with colors added.
- 133. View of Jūnisō in Yotsuya (Yotsuya Jūnisō), by Katsushika Hokusai. Woodblock print.
- 134. Kangyo Pavilion (Kangyotei), by Yasuda Denki. Copperplate etching.
- 135. Scene at Ryōgoku Bridge (Ryōgokubashi hisho), by Yasuda Raishū. Copperplate etching.
- 136. View from Senrihara (Takada Senrihara yori Teitōkyō ni itaru no zu), by Yasuda Raishū. Copperplate etching.
- 137. Ice in the Arctic Ocean (Hoppō hyōyō no zu), by Matsuda Rokuzan. Copperplate engraving.
- 138. Famous Scenes of Kyoto and Osaka (Kyōto Ōsaka meisho zu), by Matsumoto Yasuoki. Copperplate etchings.
- 139-42. Fifty-three Waystations of the Tōkaidō (Tōkaidō gojūsan-eki zu), by Yasuda Raishū. Copperplate etchings.

- 143. Chinese Landscape (Chūgoku fūkei zu). Woodblock print. Published in Soochow.
- 144. View of the Ten-Thousand-Year Bridge at Kusu, Kiangsu Province, China (Kosu Mannenkyō), by Maruyama Ōkyo. Woodblock print.
- 145. The Vendetta of the Loyal Samurai of Akō (Akō rōshi uchiiri zu), by Maruyama Ōkyo. Woodblock print.
- 146-47. Two pages from the *Hokusai manga* (Hokusai Sketchbooks), by Katsushika Hokusai. Woodblock prints.
- 148-51. Eight Scenes from Edo (Edo hakkei), by Katsushika Hokusai. Woodblock prints.
- 152. Gateway to the Shin'yoshiwara Licensed Quarter (Shin'yoshiwara daimonguchi no zu), by Katsushika Hokusai. Woodblock print.
- 153. Evening Moon at Ryōgoku Bridge (Ryōgoku no yoizuki), by Andō Hiroshige. Woodblock print.
- 154. Shinagawa as Seen in the Distance from Mount Atago (Tōto Shiba Atagoyama empō Shinagawa no umi), by Shōtei Hokuju. Woodblock print.
- 155. View of Zōjō-ji at Maruyama in Shiba (Tōto Shiba Maruyama Zōjō-ji zu), by Shōtei Hokuju. Woodblock print.
- 156. Evening Scene in the Home of a Nobleman in the Perspective-Print Style (Uki-e goten yakei), by Kitao Shigemasa. Woodblock print.
- 157. Exotic Scene of Snow-Viewing in the Perspective-Print Style (Uki-e oranda yukimi no zu), by Utagawa Toyoharu. Woodblock print.
- 158. Evening Snow at Mount Hira (Hira no bosetsu), by Utagawa Kunitora. Woodblock print.
- 159. Evening Rain at Karasaki (Karasaki no yau), by Utagawa Kunitora. Woodblock print.
- 160. Scene in Venice (Buenisu fūkei), by Utagawa Toyoharu. Woodblock print.
- 161. View of Ryōgoku in the Perspective-Print Style (Fūryū uki-e Ryōgoku no zu), by Utagawa Toyohisa. Woodblock print.
- 162. The Cannon, by Albrecht Dürer. Steel-plate etching.
- 163-64. Two sides of a copperplate (Myths [Shinwa-zu] and The Taga Castle Monument [Tagajō-hi]), by Aōdō Denzen.
- 165. Drawings of tools used by Aōdō Denzen.
- 166. Artist's Studio (Gashitsu-zu), by Shiba Kōkan. Copperplate etching.
- 167. Aōdō Denzen's Studio (Denzen gashitsu zu), by Tenyō. Colors on paper.

INTRODUCTION

When, in 1871, the newly established central government of Japan dispatched its foreign minister, Iwakura Tomomi, to the United States and Europe on a mission of diplomacy and inquiry, the total number of diplomats and other observers in the mission came to nearly a hundred people, including many of the top leaders of the nation, and their composite report ran to five large volumes. Only eighteen years prior to this event Japan had been under such rigorous edicts of seclusion, enforced by her feudal masters, that normal relations with the rest of the world had been cut off for two and a half centuries, and a violation of the seclusion policy was punishable by death. When these walls of seclusion were toppled by the arrival of Commodore Perry and his American warships in Japanese waters in 1853 and 1854, the course of Japan's destiny underwent the dramatic change suggested by the juxtaposition of these two national attitudes.

Japan's sudden openness to Western ways was indeed anticipated by a limited number of Japanese specialists in European civilization, a group of sometimes brave and often lonely students of the world beyond the barrier. Their resoluteness and knowledge comprised one of the elements in the social revolution known as the Meiji Restoration, a revolution which eventually brought Japan to its present position of eminence.

In this study Mr. Hosono has produced an account of this process of discovery as reflected in the visual arts, specifically the world of prints and etchings. He traces the pursuit of Western learning and its manifestations in art in order not only to examine the immediate consequences, but also to cast light on the subsequent results—the internationalization of Japanese art. Mr. Hosono welcomes this internationalization and salutes the enterprise and daring of its forerunners.

The first contributors to the broadening of Japan's artistic vision were Spanish and Portuguese missionaries and traders. After their expulsion and the enforcement of the first edicts of seclusion, only a few licensed Dutch traders confined to the port of Nagasaki remained to represent European culture, but these traders made available the books written in Dutch and the European engravings that inspired the first students of Western art and civilization.

The first attempts at printmaking in the Western style using Western techniques were crude and may look out of place in a country that had raised the native technique of block printing to a remarkable level of technical and artistic development. Within a generation, however, these scholars and experimenters were producing etchings and engravings imbued with vitality and distinction, and if Aōdō Denzen's vision of a German city square adorned with Roman temples and monuments seems distinctly adulatory, it can be equated with the fantasies of eighteenth-century European chinoiserie. Furthermore, even before the termination of Japan's seclusion, Westernstyle perspective principles and other stylistic devices were being assimilated by professional illustrators and landscapists such as Hokusai and Hiroshige, who otherwise stood squarely within the conventions of Sino-Japanese tradition. It was, in fact, partly for this unrecognized reason that Western collectors found these landscape prints so intelligible and appealing. The internationalization of some genres of Japanese art was thus already well under way before the arrival of Perry's "black ships" off Uraga beach.

Mr. Hosono's interpretation of this process has been carefully translated, but additional explanatory material has been inserted, where appropriate, for the benefit of Western readers. Also, his Japanese text assumes a rather high level of familiarity with Japanese history, and details which could only be confusing to most Western readers have been omitted. The translator must assume responsibility for these adaptations.

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Lloyd R. Craighill

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