

KYOTO WOODCUTS

by Naoko Matsubara





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Foreword by Fritz Eichenberg

Introduction by Bunshō Jugaku

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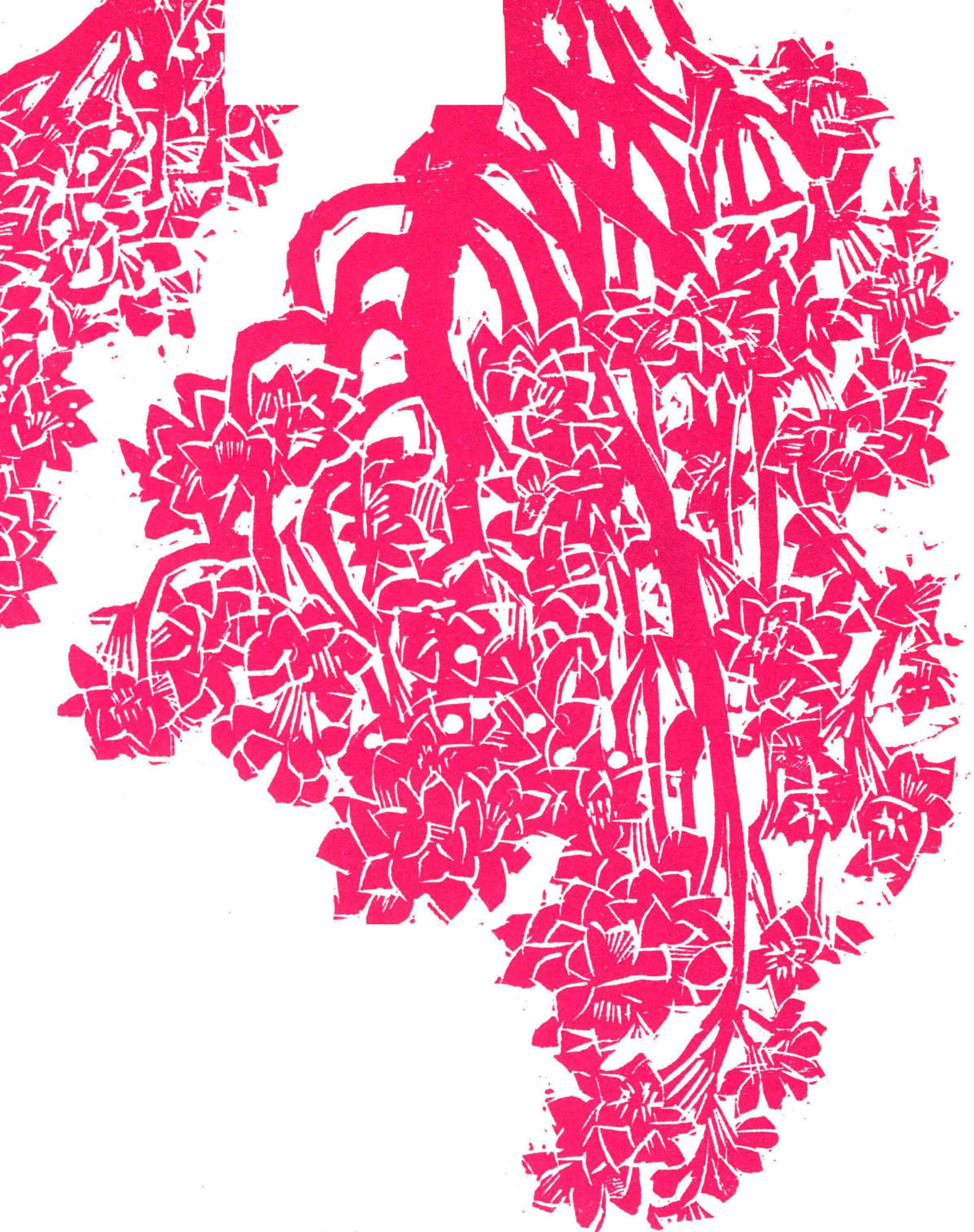
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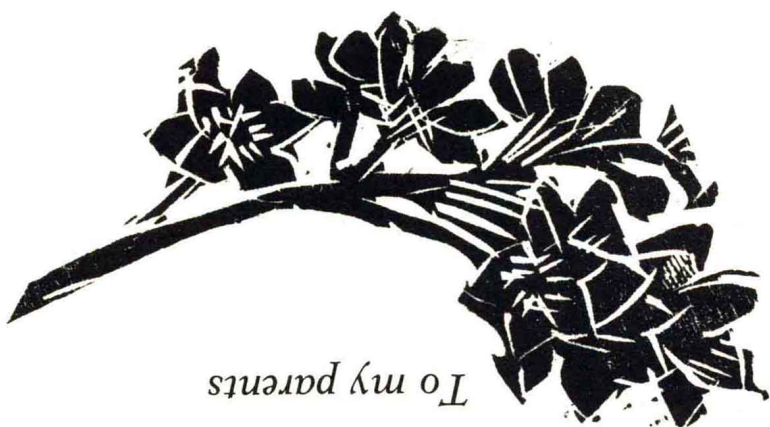


Kyoto Woodcuts



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To my parents



Foreword

As some people are born to the purple, Naoko Matsubara was born to the wood. Even her name—Honest Pinetree in literal translation—seems to have predestined her for a spectacular love affair with wood, her favorite medium.

Born in 1937 in Tokushima, raised in Kyoto under the stern eyes of her father, a chief shinto priest, and under the more indulgent eyes of her mother, descendant of an old samurai family, Naoko grew up in the shadow of the great pine trees around the Kenkun Shrine, overlooking the ancient city.

She suffered through the war years, studied at the Municipal College of Fine Arts under Frau Lizzi Ueno, born in Vienna, who had a marked influence on the young student and nourished in her the ardent desire to see the wonders of the Western world.

A Fulbright Travel Grant enabled her to fulfill that dream. She gained a graduate fellowship at Carnegie Tech in Pittsburgh where she acquired her MFA and many friends. With the little money left she struck out to see the rest of the world, spent a semester at the Royal College of Art in London, then began her safari through Europe, the Near East, returning to Japan via India, sketching, learning, and again gathering more friends on the way.

Back in Kyoto she was lucky to be asked to teach at Frau Lizzi's International Design Institute—a rare distinction for a Japanese girl her age. But the urge to go back where women can freely develop a career as men do, extremely difficult in Japan, was deeply implanted in her. In 1965 she applied for a position at the famous Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, and was accepted as an assistant to the Chairman of the Graphic Arts Department.

She brought with her a heavy portfolio of woodcuts, among them illustrations for two books commissioned by Kodansha International, and a great capacity for work—and for making friends.

Naoko has built up an enviable reputation, mainly through her favorite medium which she handles in a unique way. In samurai fashion she takes the measure of the wood's quality, its grain and dimensions, as if it were a

worthy adversary, then attacks it with lightning speed, cold steel, and only with the barest preliminaries—and usually conquers even pine boards as large as a door. Her strength does not show in her dainty, Oriental and very feminine exterior, but it comes from formidable inner sources and a determination to succeed.

Her production is prolific and includes a charming book of *Nantucket Woodcuts* (a capsule history of America); a book of *Boston Impressions*, as seen through Japanese eyes (Boston will never be the same!). A series of woodcuts for Thoreau's *Walden* was published as a limited edition portfolio, and she has illustrated several children's books. She also worked with me closely for several years on my book, *The Art of The Print*, published by Harry Abrams.

She has produced many single prints, one commissioned by the Smithsonian Institution for the Geneva Peace Conference, a print for the Detroit Institute of Arts, others for the International Print Society, the Boston-Kyoto Sister City Project.

Her work is in the permanent collections of the Library of Congress, the Fogg and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, the Albertina, the Carnegie Institute of Art, the Philadelphia Museum, Brooklyn Museum, Cincinnati Art Museum, National Museums of Modern Art in Tokyo and Kyoto, the New York and Boston Public Libraries and many others.

Naoko has had one-man shows in New York, Boston, Tokyo, Kyoto, Amsterdam, Frankfurt, Salzburg, Ottawa, Toronto and elsewhere, has participated in many international print exhibitions, and has taught at Pratt, Rhode Island University and the University of Victoria. Her most recent show, with works by Shikō Munakata has travelled the major museums in Canada under the sponsorship of the Canada Council.

Naoko Matsubara has succeeded in combining in her work the best of two worlds. In an atmosphere of unrest, too-frequent change and constant experimentation, she has acquired a new conception of her environment without losing her identity. Her work shows a balance based on inner strength and peace of mind, a rare commodity in our world today.

Fritz Eichenberg

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Fritz Eichenberg

Introduction

At the end of World War II, Japan laid aside the weapons of war; and in the three decades since the proclamation of her renewed endeavor to be a cultural polity dedicated only to peace, we have seen her become a turbulent cultural melting-pot such as could never have been imagined before the war.

Even just in the world of my acquaintance, I know of young Englishmen and Americans who have mastered the arts of restoring and mounting works of art at the Center for the Restoration of Important Cultural Properties attached to the Kyoto National Museum, or who have spent long periods in such remote spots as the mountain villages of Shimane Prefecture, where they have applied themselves diligently to papermaking using the old hand-techniques. There were cases like this even before the war; but in their number and variety today, and in the depth of their penetration, there is no comparison with the prewar situation. The hope that certain crafts and performing arts, in danger of extinction in the near future in Japan itself, might find their true heirs in various countries of Europe and America has assumed reality in the most remarkable way.

Another aspect of this tendency is the extraordinary postwar phenomenon whereby able Japanese, imbued with their own culture, have settled in large numbers in various countries of Europe and America. In some instances they have been able to enhance their own nature and to enlarge its boundaries through being permeated with West European culture, which of course they could not sufficiently gain experience of in their own country alone. The print artist Naoko Matsubara may be taken as representative of this trend.

When I first read a biographical account of Naoko Matsubara, I was reminded of a passage in *The Enduring Art of Japan*, by Langdon Warner, that outstanding interpreter of Japanese art and culture. In the chapter on Shinto, after giving illustrations of many points, he writes: "It will be seen then that Shinto, seldom the patron of the arts, was from the very beginning both nurse and preserver."

When one looks carefully at any of Naoko Matsubara's prints, one is aware of the unhesitating, unwavering, and masterly strength of her knife and of the clarity of its expression. Behind this I for one can plainly recognize the living working of the tradition described by Warner as "a kind of priestcraft, an ability to control the nature gods." It must be said that the circumstance of her father being a Shinto priest has provided a most felicitous conjunction for bringing her art to fruition.

In this context, I will mention "Funaokayama Kenkun Jinja," one of the works included here. In that it is one of the so-called new shrines, Kenkun Jinja is somewhat different in character from the other shrines and monasteries of which there are so many in Kyoto, and which pride themselves on their long and ancient history. This shrine is dedicated to Oda Nobunaga, the brilliant general who was active at the beginning of Japan's early modern period; and it was first built in 1880 by Emperor Meiji on the slopes of Funaoka-yama, "Boat-Hill Mountain," a hill some one hundred meters in height and beautifully shaped like a boat, in the Murasakino district in the northwest section of the city of Kyoto. Thirty years later the shrine was transferred to the summit, where the present sanctuary buildings stand. Documents from the Heian period, when court culture was flourishing, record that the Celebrations for the Day of the Rat (*ne no hi no asobi*) were performed here. (In this observance, people went out into the countryside on the first Rat Day of the New Year, and picked pine shoots; then they planted them in the garden of their host, and wished him long life and happiness.) In the middle ages, when men of the military classes strutted along the avenues of the capital as if they owned it, Funaoka-yama became a convenient fieldpost for them and a battleground. Now, however, the hill is covered all over with a dense growth of pine trees, the shrine precincts are suffused with an air of sublime freshness and pure serenity, and from the summit there is a fine view. Pilgrims to the shrine are released for a short while from thoughts of the great city and its poisonous exhaust fumes by which they are normally surrounded; and they can feel completely free.

What did Naoko Matsubara mean to express in this one print, "Funaokayama Kenkun Jinja"? On the one hand, it of course displays an overspreading feeling for the actual buildings which constitute Kenkun Jinja, a structure conditioned by time and space; but in another sense it has an existence which pierces through all this and transcends it—and it seems to me that we might justly describe it as representing the eternal essence of shrines within Shintoism. If those who would appreciate this print of hers will place it at the right distance for viewing, and if with controlled breathing and sharpened ears they gaze intently at it, they will soon become aware of the sound of the wind that passes through the branches of the massed pine trees, and whose heav-

only music echoed in the ears of tea masters of old. There will also come into view the figure of the artist's father as, clad in the pure white robes of his office, he performs the due ceremonies of the shrine and ascends its stone stairways that are cleansed by falling leaves. In short, on the two-dimensional surface of this one work are expressed all "her memories sad and sweet."

In the period of her apprenticeship, that is to say, when she was a student in the design course at Kyoto Municipal College of Fine Arts, Naoko Matsubara had the great good fortune to receive a thorough training in the field of print-making at the hands of Frau Professor Lizzi Ueno. According to the traditional method of Japanese print-making, which displayed itself at its most colorful and flowery in the Edo period, the lines of the preliminary drawing had to be carved into the block without veering from the original by so much as a hair. Frau Lizzi, on the other hand, taught her students to think of the wood-block as a creative medium in which limitless possibilities are inherent; and that, trusting directly to the knife alone, they must engrave the images for whose expression they should ever be searching in their hearts. Thus the block which was being engraved and the engraver himself would be one. Strangely enough, in spirit this West European method taught by Frau Lizzi follows the same path as the Far Eastern aesthetics of Zeami, who brought Nō drama to perfection.

Matsubara has been most active overseas: but the earliest person in Japan to recognize the true worth of her art in print-making was Shikō Munakata, himself a print-maker of singular quality and long known in our circle by the pet name "Bear-Child." Now, as everyone knows, Munakata had no patience with the traditional method of making preliminary drawings for prints: invariably, with an explosion of rude vigor, he would hurl his knife directly at the block. He told a Western art critic: "You see, the block is a demon. Something always happens when I take up the chisel and begin to carve the block. The demon takes over and does not pay any attention to the drawing. Sometimes I paint right on the block, and still I never know what will happen when I start carving. It just happens by itself. Through the years I have learned to let it happen as it will. I can't fight it."

Munakata's death came as a shock. But his soul can rest in peace on the other side, for the almost incomparable quality of *gusto*—to use a favourite word of William Hazlitt—which his prints possess is truly reincarnated in Naoko Matsubara, who has still many years ahead of her. Moreover, in Matsubara something not found in Munakata—what one might describe as the *esprit* of West European art traditions—is ingrained. In the event that this *esprit* differs from an artist's inborn cultural heritage, it can work negatively, against the grain of his or her nature. For Munakata this was so. But in Naoko Matsubara's case, while she was still in a formative period and her spirit was

pliant, she was allowed to immerse herself freely in the art traditions flowing in from Europe and America; and this became an important factor in giving her own art the requisite breadth and depth.

Kyoto, where Naoko lived for twenty years, from the age of four until she was twenty-three, may fairly be regarded as her home city. Concentrating all her deep love for this home city, she has rendered into woodcuts its daily life and sights, and gathered them together into a book. Of course, among the subjects contained in it will be found many which have previously been treated by other Japanese print artists. But, as is indicated by the example of "Funaokayama Kenkun Jinja," which I have already touched on, there is something remarkably different in the effects which her works present, when compared with other artists' depictions of the same subjects! Most of the other print artists continue the mannerist trends of the "Views of Famous Places" (*meisho zue*) which were popular in the late Edo period. At their best, they have an interest which derives from the use of striking juxtapositions of man and nature, such as were attempted most notably by Katsushika Hokusai in his "Thirty-Six Views of Fuji" (*Fugaku sanjūrokkei*); but this interest amounts to no more than a *haiku*-like playfulness, and they do not give one the thrilling experience of a glimpse into the profundities of the spirit. But in a Matsubara print, it is invariably a perceived *Form* underlying the landscape or the phenomenon or the persons depicted that constitutes the core of the work. This has, to be sure, connotations in the genuine art of any period or any country; but may one not see it in this instance as a throwback to or a Japanese rebirth of Expressionism, the movement which was at its height and was most vigorous in early twentieth-century Germany? At this point I am reminded that when the artist visited me recently with some of her work, she told me: "After I moved to North America and studied there, I found that, consciously or unconsciously, I was very strongly influenced by Expressionism."

To return to the subject of Kyoto: it is the archetypal ancient capital of Japan, where Matsubara spent her early years. On the *tabula rasa* of her mind a long succession of images was imprinted. A selection from these "legions of memories" has provided the themes brought together in this collection of her works; and so for me, who have lived in Kyoto more than sixty years, the impact made by each of them in turn is especially strong. I am irresistibly driven to speak about them. But I must rein in my impulses, and try to use moderation; and I will make an approach to her art by considering only the print "Nō," which stands out from among her other prints with landscape subjects. Nō drama was introduced to the West early on by Ernest Francisco Fenollosa and Ezra Pound, and elements of it were incorporated into his own dramatic work by W. B. Yeats. This historical circumstance has meant that

among the old performing arts of Japan, it has from an early date been comparatively familiar abroad. In Japan, even in this modern age, when computers assert their presence with such self-importance, Nō is assiduously cultivated and studied as a pastime indicative of the degree of their refinement, both by those who are blessed with leisure and by those who are not, by those from the monied classes and by intellectuals, by women as well as by men. In this archetypal capital city, which prides itself on the antiquity of its cultural traditions, not only are there active and flourishing Nō theaters of all schools, but in remote spots isolated from the mainstream of culture there are survivals of simpler forms which point to the origins and prototypes of this performing art; and we may encounter some examples which are cherished and protected as national cultural assets. Why then did Matsubara include this subject in the *mise en scène* of her "Kyoto"? And why am I particularly attracted by this work? Nō, which may be regarded as the quintessence of Expressionist art, was perfected in Kyoto in the Japanese middle ages, and even now its life-blood still courses into every nook and cranny of the daily life of people there. Matsubara saw with her own eyes that Kyoto was really the eternal home of Nō, she felt it in her heart, totally experienced it; and the accumulation of all these things in her generated this one work of art. There is no need to ask who is performing what. In this print the most intense *élan vital* is expressed as a moment of extreme stillness. That is the spirit of Nō. A large part of the important role in converting motion to stillness is given to the Nō mask: and of his feelings on contemplating an outstanding mask Langdon Warner wrote: "I have hypnotized myself into finding in its smooth vacuity all tragedy or the epitome of innocence or the experience of age." When I myself contemplate this print by Matsubara, which expresses the most exalted moment of the spirit, I experience the same joy as that given by William Blake's verse

Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.

So, when all is said, Naoko Matsubara, I think, is one of those who can "see a World in a Grain of Sand, and a Heaven in a Wild Flower."

Bunshō Jugaku
Sunward Cottage, Kyoto
April, 1978

Translated by David Waterhouse

List of Woodcuts

All dimensions are in centimeters.

Kenkun Jinja / Kenkun Shrine, 39 × 42

Kiyomizu / Monastery of Kiyomizu, 42 × 58

Higashiyama, 33 × 62

Daigo-No-Sakura / Cherry Tree at Daigo, 41 × 30

Daigo-No-Tō / Daigo Monastery Pagoda, 52 × 33

Kōmyō / In a Monastery, 43 × 41

Aoi Matsuri / Hollyhock Festival, 45 × 40

Shōjō / Nō Dancer, 40 × 40

Nō, 41 × 39

Kagura, 35 × 63

Minamiza, 37 × 36

Kabuki, 41 × 52

Nanzenji / Nanzen Monastery, 42 × 57

Sanjūsangendō, 43 × 71

Maiko / Kyoto Dancer, 43 × 42

Kamogawa / Kamo River, 40 × 40

Miyako Odori / Dances of the Old Capital, 36 × 36

Gion, 41 × 41

Nishiki, 41 × 40

Tenjin / Kitano Shrine Market, 45 × 79

Funaokayama Kenkun Jinja / Kenkun Shrine, Funaoka Hill, 54 × 72

Shūgakuin-No-Niwa / Garden, 42 × 78