

# Nihon no hanga

*a new and exiting private museum*

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April 23rd 2009 was a momentous and exciting day for all those who love Japanese prints, and especially for those who are attracted by 20th century Japanese prints.

On that day was the official opening of Nihon no hanga, a private museum in the centre of Amsterdam. Nihon no hanga can be found in a large 17th century house, located on the Keizersgracht, one of the famous Amsterdam canals. Just around the corner is the Nieuwe Spiegelstraat, home to many of Amsterdam's antique shops and art galleries, and in the distance, a five-minutes walk, you can see the Rijksmuseum, well-known to all tourists who visit Amsterdam.

The house, really two adjoining houses, one of which is occupied by the director of Nihon no hanga, Elise Wessels and her husband, is impressive in itself: it was extensively renovated in the years leading up to the opening of the museum, and boasts, among other fine features, a Louis XVI room still in its original state, with its

original ornaments, mirrors and clock. On the other end of the spectrum the house now also has a Japanese *tatami*-room, and a Japanese garden, or rather, in the words of Elise Wessels, a garden "with a Japanese twist". Lots of Japanese shrubs and trees, but grown in The Netherlands, and a number of original Japanese garden ornaments.

Elise Wessels and her husband Cees first visited Japan in 1984, and this journey was the start of their infatuation with Japanese prints, which has lasted until the present day. In the 90s collecting started in earnest, and in the past 15 years they have amassed a collection of more than a thousand 20th century prints, both *Shin hanga* ('New prints') and *Sōsaku hanga* ('Creative prints'). These two groups will be discussed later in this short article. At a certain moment it was decided to make the collection available to a larger audience, "to stimulate an interest in and to broaden the knowledge of this fascinating period in Japanese printmaking history". Not only can the

■ Fig. 1. Cees Wessels, Mr. Minoru Shibuya and Elise Wessels.



■ Fig. 2. The print-viewing room.



■ Fig. 3. The Japanese tatami-room.



entire collection be viewed in the house on the Keizersgracht, prints will also be available for loans to other museum institutions. All the prints have been entered into a database, so if you want to see what prints by Maekawa Senpan are in the collection the answer to that question is directly available. Thematic exhibitions will be organized two times a year. The first, *Broad Strokes and Fine Lines* was opened by His Excellency the Ambassador of Japan to The Netherlands, Mr. Minoru Shibuya. It showed a small but impressive selection of 80 woodblock prints. It should be emphasized that Nihon no hanga is a private museum, which means that it can only be visited by appointment.



■ Fig. 4. Audience during the opening speech held by Elise Wessels.

Nihon no hanga focuses on 20th century woodblock prints. Two themes are richly represented, the female form and urban landscapes, with the subject of *onsen* (bathhouse) prints as a kind of sub-theme.

A personal favourite of Elise Wessels is Takehisa Yumeji (1884-1934). Yumeji is a famous artist in Japan, but no English-language publication devoted to him has so far been published.<sup>1</sup> Yumeji cannot be firmly categorized as either a *Shin hanga* or *Sōsaku hanga* print artist, and maybe he can be considered emblematic of the way the collection has gradually been built up. Slowly and steadily the best works both of the *Shin hanga* and of the *Sōsaku hanga* movements have been added to the collection, thus achieving a wonderful balance between these two mainstreams of 20th century Japanese prints. The most famous collection of *Shin hanga* prints was the one amassed by Robert O. Muller shortly before, and long after WWII. However, he was not at all impressed by *Sōsaku hanga* prints, which he scornfully categorized as “do-it-yourself” prints. Fortunately Elise Wessels wasn’t so biased when she and her husband started their collection. Instead, *Shin hanga* and *Sōsaku hanga* masterpieces have found their way into the collection.

The birth of *Shin hanga* prints is a well-known story, often told in many books on the movement and in many monographs.

A short summary: in the first two decades of the 20th century *Ukiyo-e* as we know it was slowly dying out. Other reproduction methods, lithographs, chromolithographs and copper engravings were slowly but inexorably replacing woodblock prints. If nothing had been done the expertise of

blockcarvers and printers would have disappeared. Fortunately there was the right man in the right place at the right moment, Watanabe Shōzaburō. In 1906 he set up shop, and after producing two series of recarved reproductions of *ukiyo-e* masterpieces, new and original prints were produced from 1915 onward. His best-known artists from this early period were Kawase Hasui and Itō Shinsui (1898-1972). Many other artists jumped on board, and Watanabe’s business began to flourish, and he could even take the destruction of his business by the 1923 earthquake in his stride. Two large exhibitions showing prints by *Shin hanga* artists in USA in the Toledo Museum of Art, Toledo, Ohio, in 1930 and 1936 firmly rooted *Shin hanga* prints among American collectors.

Watanabe Shōzaburō wasn’t alone of course. Other publishers and other artists enriched the movement, but Pearl Harbour, on December 8 1941, put an abrupt stop to the spread of *Shin hanga* in the USA.

The *Sōsaku hanga* print movement developed along entirely different lines. The movement is generally understood to have started in July 1904, when a print by Yamamoto Kanae (1882-1946), ‘*Gyofu*- Fisherman’, was published in the magazine *Myōjō* - Morning star. This print was so very special because for the first time the artist had done every stage of the printing process himself: he had carved the blocks, he had selected the type of paper he wanted to use, and he had printed the number of copies he wanted. No publisher had played a role, whereas the publisher had always been the central figure in the production of *ukiyo-e* prints. Publishers like Watanabe occupied the same position as their 19th century predecessors had, when they started producing *Shin hanga* prints.

What then started was a fascinating development of small, and continuously changing groups of (mostly) young artists. Many felt attracted to the idea that woodblock prints could be created without the interference of anybody else, that you were your own master. The first ten years saw the arrival on the scene of Onchi Kōshirō, Ishii Hakutei, and Oda Kazuma (1882-1956), all of whom are represented in the Nihon no hanga collection with their best works.

Especially interesting is the interaction between European and Japanese artists at that time. Many Japanese artists had been to Europe around the





■ Fig. 5. Hashiguchi Goyō (1880-1921). Preparatory watercolour drawing for a never-published print, showing a woman leaning on a window sill. Instructions for the printing process are written in pencil in the margins.

Nihon no hanga collection, Amsterdam



■ Fig. 6. Itō Shinsui (1898-1972). Summer's midday. Published by Watanabe Shōzaburō in 1917.

Nihon no hanga collection, Amsterdam



■ Fig. 7. Kobayakawa Kiyoshi (1889-1948). Tipsy. From the series *Women's manners of today*. Privately published in 1930.

Nihon no hanga collection, Amsterdam

turn of the century and had returned full of impressions and ideas. Europe had of course assimilated Japanese *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints in the second half of the 19th century, and now young Japanese artists were in their turn inspired by the results of those earlier influences.

*Myōjō*, published between 1900 and 1908, the magazine that had brought the first *Sōsaku hanga* print, 'Fisherman', illustrated works by Alphonse Mucha, and other Art Nouveau painters. The magazine

Whereas Watanabe Shōzaburō had meanwhile established a profitable business, *Sōsaku hanga* artists needed other sources of income to pay their bills. They had the magazines to disseminate their artistic ideas, but hardly any of their prints were sold. Onchi Kōshirō became famous as a book designer, Maekawa Senpan became a cartoonist and others, like Hiratsuka Un'ichi, became teachers.

Still, the *Sōsaku hanga* movement remained vigorous and became ever stronger until WWII.

The collection of *Nihon no hanga* covers the period until WWII very well. Also during the war prints were made, but these didn't find their way outside Japan of course. After the war the best period of *Shin hanga* was over. The great Watanabe artists like Hasui and Shinsui kept producing prints, but a sense of repetitiousness gradually crept in, though many beautiful designs were still made.

The American occupation of Japan between 1945 and 1952 had a completely different influence on either movement: American G.I.'s were thrilled by the prints of Yoshida Hiroshi and Kawase Hasui, which reflected a nostalgic pre-war Japan, and they bought them by the thousands. For many they were souvenirs, like lacquer boxes or kimono. *Sōsaku hanga* was discovered by a few US officers, Ernst Hacker and William Hartnett, and by a civilian employee of the US army, Oliver Statler. Especially the latter became very active in promoting "modern Japanese creative prints" (in the words of James Michener, novelist & collector) in the USA. He arranged sales to individual collectors and to museums, and in 1955 his famous book, *Modern Japanese Prints – An Art Reborn* was published.

That year was also the year that Onchi Kōshirō died. With him the most important exponent of the movement passed away. He had been its most outspoken and its most influential member, and though the movement continued its best years were over.

The period between 1945 and 1955 was more important for *Sōsaku hanga* than for *Shin hanga*. Artists from the former group thrived on the renewed contacts with the West. Artists like Saitō Kiyoshi and Sekinō Jun'ichirō (1914-88) made (part of) their best work in this period. Other younger artists could still profit from the experience of older artists like Onchi and Hiratsuka, who never tired of instructing and helping them financially.



■ Fig. 8. Takehisa Yumeji (1884-1934). Treasure boat (*Takarabune*). Published by Yanagiya in 1920.

*Nihon no hanga* collection, Amsterdam

*Shirakaba – White birch*, which was published between 1910 and 1923, introduced works by Van Gogh, Cézanne, Gauguin and other Impressionists. German Expressionist woodcuts were introduced in the 1914 exhibition 'Der Sturm' at the Hibiya Museum in Tokyo.





■ Fig. 9. Kawanishi Hide (1894-1965). Bathhouse (Onsen). From the series Woodblock prints by Kawanishi Hide (Kawanishi Hide moku-hanga).

Nihon no hanga collection, Amsterdam



■ Fig. 10. Maekawa Senpan (1888-1960). View from a tatami room.

Nihon no hanga collection, Amsterdam

Back to the Nihon no hanga collection, and to the museum. Though spacious enough the house on the Keizersgracht can only have a very limited part of the collection on display. As mentioned previously, all the other prints are available in the database. Computer screens show the prints and the descriptions, and the actual prints may be seen when requested. My colleague, Chris Uhlenbeck, is the museum's curator, and his expertise is evident everywhere. He has guided Elise Wessels

■ Fig. 11. Onchi Kōshirō  
(1891-1955). A girl (*Shōjo*),  
1940

Nihon no hanga collection,  
Amsterdam



in the selection of new acquisitions in the years leading up to the opening of the museum. One of his tasks will be to organize thematic exhibitions in the years to come. After the splendid opening exhibition we can safely look forward to many more inspiring selections.

Now that a start has been made the future holds many options. It is only rarely that a museum like this is created. For collectors to bequeath their collections to museums while still actively collecting and adding to the collection is most unusual. A lot of choices will have to be made. Just to mention a few that come to mind: is it prudent to continue as before, i.e. add prints to the collection based on your personal taste (which,

after all, has resulted in this beautiful collection)? Or should you add prints whose importance is beyond any doubt, but which do not have much appeal to the one who is paying the bill? Basically it comes down to this: should a personal collection slowly evolve into a museum collection, and if so, what will be lost and what will be gained?

One more question at least needs to be addressed, and it is a question I have already posed to Elise Wessels: to what period must the museum collection be limited? So far, the vast majority of prints belong to the period 1900-1945. For *Shin hanga* prints that is an acceptable end-date, although Hasui didn't die until 1957 and Shinsui lived until 1972. But not to cover the period 1945-1955 seems a missed opportunity for *Sōsaku hanga* prints. In those 10 years the contacts with the West were re-established, and during this decade the movement certainly went through one of its most creative periods. That's why I would suggest that the period be extended until 1955, the year Onchi Kōshirō died, and the year the first major publication on 'Creative prints' appeared. The overwhelming feeling that remains after spending time in this new museum is one of awe: what a lot has been achieved in so little time! How very visible is the emphasis on quality, in short, how remarkable to find this museum in Amsterdam, housing the best collection of both *Shin hanga* and *Sōsaku hanga* prints in Europe.

## Publication

*Broad Strokes and Fine Lines, The Dual Tradition in 20th Century Printmaking* gives brief historical overviews of the *Shin hanga* and *Sōsaku hanga* traditions. In a preface the director Elise Wessels sketches the origins of the collection. Forty prints are illustrated including works by Yamamoto Kanae Onchi Kōshirō, Itō Shinsui, Hashiguchi Goyō and many others. 48 pp, pb, full colour, with a full listing of the artists represented in the collection.

Euro 7.50 plus postage and packing. Outside The Netherlands only priority (airmail) is available.

Website: [www.nihon-no-hanga.nl](http://www.nihon-no-hanga.nl)

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## Note

1. A short article titled 'Yumeji's Twelve Views of Nagasaki' by Helen Merritt and Nanako Yamada has been published in *Andon* 51, 1995, p. 5-11.