

Underdogs and Antiheroes: Alterity in the Edo Period and Beyond

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All too often, the feudal Japan of the western imagination is defined entirely by the mythos of the samurai: Noble warriors driven by rigid adherence to the principles of *bushidō*, devoting their limited recreational time to such lofty pursuits as zen meditation and the tea ceremony. While this picture of samurai life is hardly complete, it also belies the

reality that in the most vibrant cultural centres of the Edo Period—the ‘Three Cities’ of Tokyo, Kyoto, and Osaka—the most influential tastemakers were not from ruling samurai families at all. Rather, urban fashions were set by an ascendant merchant class. Unable to flaunt their wealth in the same manner as the samurai due to strict sumptuary

laws intended to perpetuate the Neo-Confucian hierarchy of the Tokugawa regime, these *nouveau-riches* rapidly developed an artistic heritage all their own, defined by clever repartee and dramatic bombast rather than by any idealised notion of samurai honour. One quintessential product of this heritage is the *ukiyo-e* (lit. 'picture[s] of the floating world') woodblock print, which became increasingly popular in the eighteenth- and nineteenth- centuries owing to a relatively low price-point and the potential for mass production. *Ukiyo-e* prints are given special attention in *Underdogs and Antiheroes: Japanese Prints from the Moskowitz Collection*, a temporary exhibition curated by the Smithsonian Institute's National Museum of Asian Art, running from March 19 2022, to January 29 2023. In *Objects and Antiheroes*, visually striking prints allow for an exploration of alterity in the Edo Period through depictions of kabuki superstars and other celebrated figures who—despite their fame—operated on the periphery of 'respectable' society. This theme is most apparent through images of tattooed ruffians and cross-dressing actors whose fame offers a compelling

glimpse into the unique moral sensibilities of the Three Cities' merchant elite.

While the rejection of societal norms is an intentional through-line in *Underdogs and Antiheroes*, it is most readily apparent in the heavily-tattooed figures of works such as *Nakamura Kanemon IV as Autumn Moon over the Musashi Moor* and *Urawa: Uoya Danshichi*. Beginning in 1720, tattooing was employed by the Tokugawa regime as a visible punishment for extortionists, swindlers, and fraudsters—a system which begat the belief within 'respectable' society that any tattooed individuals were criminals worthy of fear and derision (Samel 2004, p.965). This unintentionally brought about the flourishing of tattooing as a countercultural art form, widely embraced by kabuki actors who were themselves positioned towards the bottom of the Edo Period's rigid social order. As popular actors found their way into *ukiyo-e* prints, bolstered by their celebrity status among the consumer class of the Three Cities, so too did their tattoos. Prints of tattooed figures—mostly kabuki actors and firemen—comprise nearly a third of the works on

display in *Underdogs and Antiheroes*, allowing viewers to experience what is essentially two artworks in one: the *ukiyo-e* print and the tattoo that it depicts.

The association between tattoos and criminality in Japanese society is one that persists to this day (Samel 2004, p.967), a fact with which many westerners will likely be familiar. This simple cultural insight allows viewers to situate images of tattooed individuals within *Underdogs and Antiheroes*' overarching theme of alterity, even if they have little prior knowledge of Edo period social mores. Portraits of tattooed figures also provide an accessible medium for audiences to engage with the concept of *mitate*, an element of many *ukiyo-e* prints which is translatable roughly as 'parody' or 'analogue.' *Mitate* is a rhetorical technique in which two contrasting ideas are presented side-by-side, adding a provocative element of humour or wit to the image (Thompson 1986, p.22).

Poem by Ariwara Narihira Ason:
Lu Zhishen, the Tattooed Priest demonstrates *mitate* through its juxtaposition of the ideal of priestly holiness with the course, tattooed

appearance of its central figure. This is an instance of the technique that should be decipherable to most audiences of *Underdogs and Antiheroes*, allowing them to engage with the work naturally in a manner not unlike how it would have been understood by its original viewers. Beyond this single work, the exhibition offers numerous thought-provoking examples of *mitate* for audiences to puzzle over, including *Three Big Girls* and *The Nine-Dragoned Shi Jin*, to name a few.

While images of tattooed figures demonstrate the fascination of Edo Period merchants with subversive alterity in opposition to the Tokugawa regime's moralistic status quo, *Underdogs and Antiheroes* also offers an exploration of alterity in the context of gender presentation and sexuality through images of famous *onnagata* from the Edo Period to the present day. The term '*onnagata*' can be translated literally as 'female role,' and refers to male kabuki actors who specialised in portraying women onstage. From 1629 to 1877, all female roles in kabuki were performed by *onnagata*, owing to a government prohibition on women appearing on the kabuki stage brought

about by moral panic over rampant prostitution among kabuki actresses (Leiter 1999, p.495). As a result, many of the most instantly recognisable 'women' in Edo Japan were, in fact, men. While women are no longer barred from appearing in kabuki productions, *onnagata* continue to play a vast majority of female roles in 21st-century productions and are among the most celebrated performers on stage today.

Far from writing off *onnagata* as a necessary political expedient on the behalf of theatre managers, audiences celebrated the talented performers as paragons of femininity. As the saying goes, men wanted them, and women wanted to be them. It has even been asserted that 'only a male actor can suggest the essence of a woman,' and that *onnagata* were 'more feminine than women' (Brandon 2012, p.122). Regardless of the veracity of these claims, an element of *eros* was essential to any successful *onnagata* performance, reflecting an element of sexual fluidity in premodern Japanese culture that may come as a surprise to some westerners (Leiter 1999, p.512). On that point, many historical *onnagata* demonstrated a complicated

relationship with gender identity, living as women off the stage on the advice of theatrical treatises like *Ayamegusa*, which suggested that the practice would allow them to more successfully inhabit their roles in the theatre (Leiter *et al* 1966, p.392). *Underdogs and Antiheroes* offers a few tantalising glimpses at the changing face of the *onnagata*, from a 19th-century rendition in *Act Four from Shigure Karakasa* to the much more contemporary *Ichikawa Ennosuke III as Kirare Otomi and Ichikawa Danshirō IV as Komori no Yasuzō in Kirare Otomi*, dated to 1992.

The portrait of Ichikawa Ennosuke III is also unique as one of a few prints featured in *Underdogs and Antiheroes* that are surprisingly contemporary, offering a recontextualisation of the historical *ukiyo-e* medium as an ongoing element of Japan's vibrant visual culture. Other modern works featured in the exhibition include *Onoe Tatsunosuke in the role of Danshichi Kurobei* (1983), *National Sport* (1986), and *Onoe Kikugorō VII as Kirare Yosaburō in Genjidana* (1990). While the portrait of Onoe Tatsunosuke is rather conventional in style, the latter two works demonstrate the breadth of

stylistic possibilities for the woodblock print as a medium, retaining an element of the classic *ukiyo-e* aesthetic while incorporating more recent visual trends to create something entirely unexpected. The most recent work in the *Underdogs and Antiheroes* exhibition is the 2018 print *Kuniyoshi's Face of Jumbled People* by the legendary Tsuruya Kōkei—also responsible for the aforementioned portraits of Ichikawa Ennosuke III and Onoe Kikugorō VII—which synthesises traditional *ukiyo-e* subject matter with an almost post-impressionistic use of colour and line to create a shoulder-up portrait composed of writhing human figures but also seemingly sculpted from flowing water. Given that impressionism as a style was partly inspired by *ukiyo-e* prints, there is a sense in which this work brings a major Japanese influence on western aesthetics full circle, highlighting the transnational character of truly innovative art in the twenty-first century.

Of course, the images and themes detailed here are but a small sample of what *Underdogs and Antiheroes* has to offer. The full exhibition catalogue, which is available online, features 89

works from the Smithsonian's Moskowitz collection, covering far too many subjects to discuss in a single review. The exhibition succeeds in exploring the eclectic tastes of Edo Japan's cultural tastemakers through a single medium—the woodblock print—which was and continues to be a hallmark of the country's unique visual culture. Moreover, *Underdogs and Antiheroes* celebrates subjects on the periphery of Edo society, allowing audiences to move beyond the archetypal representations of Japanese culture that all too often dominate museums' Asian collections. Overall, the exhibition is a testament to the keen curatorial eye of its organisers. All those with an eye for Japanese art, printmaking, or theatre would do well to experience it for themselves.

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