Kogyo and Noh Drama Prints



Kogyo Japanese Woodblock Print (detail)

Although many Japanese woodblock _ prints were created illustrating the two main types of traditional Japanese theater – Noh drama and Kabuki – those illustrating Noh drama did not appear until the very end of the 19th century. Until then, most Noh plays were not even accessible to the general public. They were considered an aristocratic form of theater reserved for the upper class, as opposed to Kabuki, which was popular theater intended for common people. Whereas Kabuki combined music, dance and drama, Noh drama reduced plot and stage decoration to a minimum. About the only visual attraction for the audience were lavish, colorful costumes.



Rare vertical format Kogyo Drama Print

More than any other Ukiyo-e artist, Kogyo Tsukioka produced woodblock prints considered to be perfect reflections of Noh drama. Kogyo prints show an actor or a group of actors against a plain background, sometimes with one or two requisites. A typical print by the artist looks more like an ink drawing, painting or watercolor than a classical Ukiyo-e print. Although he created a number of woodcuts dealing with natural history and contemporary events (such as the Russo-Japanese War), his name will always be associated with Noh drama woodcuts he designed for the publisher Heikichi from1897 to 1926.

Tsukioka Kogyo was born as Hanyu Sadanosuke in Tokyo in 1869. When he was fifteen years old, his mother married Tsukioka Yoshitoshi, the famous Ukiyo-e printmaker. From Yoshitoshi he received his new family name (Tsukioka), his first lessons in Japanese printmaking, and a deep appreciation of Noh theatrical drama. Later, Kogyo became the student of another well-known Ukiyo-e artist, Ogata Gekko, and following an old Japanese tradition, he received a new first name from his teacher, Kogyo.

Kogyo was also considered a technical innovator of woodblock printing. Concentrating upon the elaborate costumes of the Noh theatre, many of his woodcuts utilized silver and gold inks, overlays of mica grounds, and blind-stamping, a method where a raised design is impressed into the paper. The prints Kogyo created provide one of the richest veins of historical and artistic information about Noh drama available today. They are widely considered veritable tours-de-force of late nineteenth and early twentieth century Ukiyo-e.