



Actor Arashi Rikan III as Mago Dōhachi

Utagawa Kunisada (Utagawa Toyokuni III)

Not on display

Title/Description: Actor Arashi Rikan III as Mago Dōhachi

Artist/Maker: Utagawa Kunisada (Utagawa Toyokuni III) (Artist)

Born: 1854 1854 - 8/1854

Measurements: Support and image h.358 x w.235 mm

Inscription: Date seal

Accession Number: 41450

Historic Period: Edo period (AD 1600-1868)

Catering to the public's insatiable demand for actor prints, publishers in Edo (present-day Tokyo) and Osaka issued thousands of designs in connection with each new kabuki production. Kabuki is an actor-centred theatre, and these prints were instrumental in promoting the actors' celebrity status. Kabuki actors were the heartthrobs of their day and attracted legions of loyal fans.

Utagawa Kunisada (1786-1865) and his publisher Izutsuya Shōkichi, issued this coloured woodblock print to publicise a kabuki theatre production starring actors Arashi Rikan III as the Packhorse Driver (Mago) Dōhachi and Ichikawa Kodanji IV as Naosuke Gonbei (object number: 41451). The central sheet (missing from the collection) depicts actor Bandō Shūka I performing the female role of Hitomaru Oroku. [1] The scene is set beside an embankment and involves a scuffle between Mago Dōhachi and Naosuke Gonbei over a drawstring pouch. In the triptych this pouch is in the hands of Hitomaru Oroku. Kunisada uses the triptych format to capture a frozen moment of heightened drama, when all three actors simultaneously pause to strike a choreographed pose (J. *mie*).

The main figure in this sheet is the critically acclaimed actor, Arashi Rikan III (1812-1863). Born in Kyoto, he trained under the Kamigata actors Onoe Tamizō II and Arashi Rikan II, before receiving the title Arashi Rikan III in 1843. Arashi Rikan III was celebrated for his versatility as a *kaneru yakusha*, capable of playing female roles (J. *onnagata*), male leads (J. *tachiyaku*) and male villains (J. *katakiyaku*). [2]

On stage, kabuki actors performed larger than life characters, and their clothing and props were also scaled-up for dramatic effect. In the print, Rikan III is shown hunched forward, draped with fabric, a *tenugui* cloth at his neck. The crown of Rikan's head is in line with the top of his right shoulder and his chin is lower than his right armpit. This contorted posture serves to amplify the bulk of the actor, who was known for his past performances as sumo wrestlers.

Although relatively cheap to buy (equivalent in price to a double helping of buckwheat noodles) [3], the technical quality of the print's execution is extremely high. Utagawa Kunisada has chosen to contrast the black and white checked clothing worn by Rikan's Mago Dōhachi with the swirling bright blue water in the background. The viewer can enjoy the subtle colour variation of water, horizon and sky that results from gradation printing (J. *bokashi-zuri*). The jet-black of the actor's clothing and gaiters may have been produced by using a thickened ink or over-printing. These techniques have been skillfully used to enhance the design's visual impact.

The scene is from a play titled *Azuma kudari gojūsan tsugi* (五十三番東下り), which roughly translates as 'Fifty-three Stations to the Eastern Provinces'. This is a reference to the Tōkaidō or Eastern Coastal Road, which connected the cities of Kyoto in the west and Edo in the east. Azuma is usually equated with Edo. The wooden signpost in the print reveals that the drama is set by the Ōi River 大井川 in Shizuoka prefecture.

The play was performed at the Kawarazaki Theatre from the 26th day of the 7th lunar month of 1854 (Kaei 7). [4] The date seal on the print indicates government-appointed censors approved the design in the 8th lunar month of 1854 (8th month, Tiger year). Text on the print boasts that the kabuki actors are performing to a packed house (*ōiri kanō* 大入り). The play was already attracting large audiences when this print was issued.

The actor's name does not appear anywhere on this print. The red cartouche in the right hand corner of the print only gives the role the actor is performing, 'Mago Dōhachi'. The second cartouche in the bottom left hand corner contains the print artist's name, 'Toyokuni'. Peculiarly, the star of the show is nameless.

In the summer of 1842, the office of the North City Magistrate issued an edict that attempted to limit the influence of kabuki theatre on popular culture by forbidding publishers from issuing prints of actors. [5] The authorities disapproved of the Kabuki theatre's extravagance, fearing that its on and off-stage scandals would corrupt public morals. After a brief lull in production, actor prints were again issued but without cartouches announcing the actors' names.

In order to avoid fines and arrest, artists and publishers decided to forgo naming actors. From around 1845 onwards, they secured their profits by exploiting an existing technique used to capture 'actor likenesses' (J. *yakusha nigao*). *Nigao* were 'a system of standardised, highly stylised caricature-like "distillations" of likenesses of individual actors', [6] which rendered the facial features of kabuki stars instantly recognisable to their fan base. Publishers and artists no longer needed to explicitly identify the actor in the print.

Artists Katsukawa Shunshō (1726-1792) and Ippitsusai Bunchō (1725-1794) are credited with the invention of *nigao*. This device was shown to full effect in their 'Picture-book of Stage Fans' (*Ehon butai ōgi* 大歌舞扇) in 1770 [7]. The founder of the Utagawa School, Utagawa Toyokuni (1769-1825) published his method in 1817 with 'Quick Lessons in Drawing True Likenesses of Actors' (*Yakusha nigao haya geiko* 大歌舞扇速習). [8] [9] This work had a lasting influence over the aesthetics of Utagawa School, actor-print production.

Artists made Arashi Rikan III recognisable by capturing his long oval face with its square jaw and prominent, cleft chin. In woodblock prints, the actor's eyebrows are drawn as thin straight lines that tilt upwards at the sides. The nose of the actor is slightly hooked, and a small furrow between the eyebrows is suggested by two comma-shaped wrinkles. When performing male roles, Rikan's eyes are often shown rimmed with black with flicks at the outer corners, and his mouth appears thin-lipped with a downward curve. [10]

An identical complete triptych can be found at Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (object number: 11.44151a-c). [11]

Vanessa Tothill, May 2020

[1] The actors in this print were identified by Kurahashi Masae for Ritsumeikan University's Art Research Centre Ukiyo-e Database, in partnership with The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (2006-2008).

[2] Samuel L. Leiter, ed., *New Kabuki Encyclopedia: A Revised Adaption of 'Kabuki Jiten'* (Westport, Connecticut; London: Greenwood Press, 1997), p. 22.

[3] In 1842 the price of a single sheet print was fixed by the government at 16 mon, the same price as a double helping of buckwheat noodles. By 1854, the price may have escalated slightly.

Timothy Clark, *Kuniyoshi: From the Arthur R. Miller Collection* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2009), p. 24.

[4] Dated by Kabuki playbills, such as object number: 11.28070 in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. <https://collections.mfa.org/objects/225480> [accessed 10 May 2020]

[5] Arakawa Hidetoshi, ed., *Tenpō kaikaku machibure shiryō* (Tokyo: Yūzankaku Shuppan, 1974), pp. 155-58. Also mentioned in Sarah E. Thompson and H. D. Harootunian, *Undercurrents in the Floating World: Censorship and Japanese Prints* (New York: The Asia Society Galleries, 1991), p. 79.

[6] David Bell, *Chūshingura and the Floating World: The Representation of Kanadehon Chūshingura in Ukiyo-e Prints* (London; New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 32.

[7] The British Museum, object number: 1915,0823,0.59.

[8] The British Museum, object number: 1938,1008,0.19.

[9] Ellis Tinios, *Mirror of the Stage: The Actor Prints of Kunisada* (Leeds: The University Gallery Leeds, 1996), pp. 9-10; Laura J. Mueller, ed., *Competition and Collaboration: Japanese Prints of the Utagawa School* (Leiden; Boston: Hotei Publishing, 2007), pp. 46-48. For the Osaka *nigao* system, see C. Andrew Gerstle, *Kabuki Heroes on the Osaka Stage 1780-1830* (London: The British Museum Press, 2005), pp. 45-51.

[10] The *nigao* of Arashi Rikan III is pictured in a Tsubouchi Hakase Kinen Engeki Hakubutsukan, Waseda Daigaku, ed., *Yakusha-e kenkyū shiryō 1, Zōho kokon haiyū nigao taizen, Engeki hakubutsukan yakusha-e kenkyūkai hen* (Tokyo: Tsubouchi Hakase Kinen Engeki Hakubutsukan, Waseda Daigaku, 1998), no. 38, p. 136.

[11] Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, object number: 11.44151a-c.

<https://collections.mfa.org/objects/486657/actors-ichikawa-kodanji-iv-as-naosuke-gonbei-r-bando-shu?jsessionid=C2472230E9B55526877970230DA0AFAB?ctx=4967522f-eff4-4f22-b268-a0c71acbd200&idx=0> [accessed 6 May 2020]

Further Reading

Hidetoshi Arakawa, ed., *Tenpō kaikaku machibure shiryō* (Tokyo: Yūzankaku Shuppan, 1974)

David Bell, *Chūshingura and the Floating World: The Representation of Kanadehon Chūshingura in Ukiyo-e Prints* (London; New York: Routledge, 2013)

Timothy Clark, *Kuniyoshi: From the Arthur R. Miller Collection* (London: Royal Academy of Arts,

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Sarah E. Thompson and H. D. Harootunian, *Undercurrents in the Floating World: Censorship and Japanese Prints* (New York: The Asia Society Galleries, 1991)

Ellis Tinios, *Mirror of the Stage: The Actor Prints of Kunisada* (Leeds: The University Gallery Leeds, 1996)

Provenance

Bequest of Professor Frank Thistlethwaite. Donated to the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia in 2003.
