

Comic Books of a Different Century

Written by Michael LoGuidice

Wednesday, 06 June 2001 18:00

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The Japanese block prints in the Davenport Museum of Art's wonderful current exhibit took me back to the late '60s and early '70s, when I almost got kicked out of art school for suggesting that comic books were art.

The Hairy Who, Mr. Wonderful, Mom's Home-made Comics, and the entire genre of underground comics that had sprouted up were art, as far as I was concerned. It might not be *enduring* art, because the only examples of what I'm talking about around today might be *Mad* magazine and the cover of Big Brother & The Holding Company's CD *Cheap Thrills*.

I took some additional affirmation of the notion of comic books as art when I saw their similarities to Japanese block prints in the DMA's *Of Samurai & Chrysanthemums: Edo Period Woodblock Prints & Meiji Period Bronzes*.

Before you kick me out of art school again, let's look at these similarities. Block printing was the mass-media technology of the Japanese society from the 1600s through 1800s; comic books are printed for mass-market distribution. There are captions printed on the artworks; our comic books liberally use text to move the story along. The use of line predominates the compositions in both media. The colors are simple without much shading and variation in both, partly as a response to the demands of mass production.

Even the subject matter of the action-filled block prints is similar to that of Western comic books: heroes in battle, actors, and courtesans. One of the block prints is from the series titled *Heroic Stories of the Taiheiki*.

The installation notes on the piece state, "The publication of prints featuring heroes of Chinese and Japanese history increased after the government banned the portrayal of actors and courtesans to force artists to look for more morally instructive subject matter." How often have

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our various levels of government wanted to censor our satirical comics? How long would the various arbiters of morality stand by while comic books depicted scene after scene of prostitutes and brothels?

The block print that most brought this home to me was *Boating in the Evening Cool in Ryogoku in the Eastern Capital*, which shows courtesans in pleasure boats down by the docks. If the idea was to make block prints that were popular with the people, the selections of sexy women and military heroes are safe choices.

Frankly, I enjoyed the block prints because they are great examples of popular art. They reflect the culture of Japan from 1615 to 1868, generally referred to as the Edo or Tokugawa period. The emperor resided in Koyoto but the shogun resided in Edo, which is now known as Toyoko; power emanated from the emperor but was wielded by the shogun. The fact that Japan was ruled by a military government helps explain why courtesans and battles were prominently featured in the block-print art. The Tokugawa shogunate was the longest period of uninterrupted peace Japan ever enjoyed, and the brilliant and ruthless administration of government, combined with the seclusion of the country, allowed for the flowering of Japanese culture in an unprecedented way.

We can see the more uplifting side of Japanese art of this period in the bronze sculptures also in the exhibit. There are several images of samurai warriors, but there are other subjects that teach us much about the art of the time – the woodcutter and the smoker being two examples.

Each of the samurai-warrior sculptures shows fluid motion. The muscles are smooth and polished, as is the clothing flowing in concert with the figure. The starkest contrast is with the sculpture of the woodcutter. The woodcutter's brow is craggy, his hair is shaggy, and you can feel the roughness of his clothing.

The seamstress is all about softness and static form. This sculpture has no motion, as she sits and sews. Her clothing is soft without being shiny, and her skin likewise shows softness with sheen. Her features are rounded and radiate domesticity.

The best part of these sculptures is that the style of the modeling complements the subject matter. A smooth, shiny finish is used to depict quick, violent action. A rough surface is used to show a rustic, rural subject. And a smooth yet soft finish is used to show the grace and femininity of a woman.

This show gives us a clear insight into Edo Japan and includes some fine examples of both printmaking and sculpture. Besides, other than seeing a show of Roy Lichtenstein's work, how often can you see comic-book art in a museum?