A "representative collection": The history of ukiyo-e at the National Gallery of Victoria (1909-2005)

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Introduction

The National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) was the first Australian public art gallery to begin collecting Japanese art and, up until the 1980s, had the most significant collection in the country. A major strength of this collection was its ukiyo-e woodblock prints. However, the history of this ukiyo-e collection, which reflects the history of the NGV Japanese collection as a whole, provides a salutary lesson in how culturally inclusive art museums can, despite providing a "representative collection," be devalued by apathy in regards to curatorial expertise, research and collection development.

Early history

In 1861, ten years after the colony of Victoria had separated from New South Wales and became a colony in its own right, the Art Room in the State Library of Victoria was opened later changing its name to the National Gallery of Victoria. This was a name it maintained beyond federation of the colonies in 1901 and the establishment of the Australian National Gallery (later changed to the National Gallery of Australia, NGA) in Canberra in 1982.

Stimulated by the nineteenth century intercolonial and international exhibitions the NGV began collecting Japanese art works with the first catalogued work being an early nineteenth century lacquer bottle accessioned in 1868. These works have not been included in any published NGV exhibition catalogues.

The most significant acquisitions of Japanese art in the NGV’s history came during the tenure of the second director; the English artist Bernard Hall (1859-1935) who took up the position in 1892. He is said to have had a Japanese woodblock print collection and also included, in an Orientalist manner, Asian artifacts in his own paintings. In his other role as Head of the NGV Art School he also trained artists who would later develop affinities to the Japanese woodblock print, including Violet Teague (1872-1951) and Margaret Preston (1875-1963).

What enabled Hall to make such a significant contribution to the NGV collection was a major bequest during his tenure by the entrepreneur, art collector and philanthropist Alfred Felton (1831-1904). Having no direct descendants this wealthy businessman left his estate in trust on the condition that the large income it derived be equally divided between Victorian charities and the National Gallery of Victoria for the acquisition of art works which he specified should be of, “artistic and educational value, and calculated to raise or improve public taste.”
In 1906,\(^{(4)}\) two years after Felton’s death, the NGV Japanese art collection was to benefit from his legacy with a purchase using funds from his bequest of a seventeenth century six-fold screen attributed to the Sōtatsu School. This work was acquired under the advice of Jean-Jacques Marquet de Vasselot (1871-1946)\(^{(5)}\) a curator of decorative arts at the Louvre Museum establishing a pattern that continues until the present day of seeking the advice of overseas ‘specialists’ in the acquisition of Japanese art.\(^{(6)}\) This is at a time when American and European collectors and institutions were amassing coherent collections, in many cases directly from Japanese sources and based upon their informed knowledge of the subject.

The NGV maintained this "cultural cringe"\(^{(7)}\) with the purchase in 1909, under the advice of an Englishman of part of an American’s collection of *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints. This *ukiyo-e* collection purchased in 1909 was that of the Japan-based American businessman John Stewart Happer (1863-1937). During his time in Japan he developed an interest in *ukiyo-e* prints amassing an extensive collection. He had intended to keep his *ukiyo-e* collection in tact but was forced to sell it due to the illness of his wife.\(^{(8)}\) Thus he commissioned Sotheby, Wilkinson and Hodge to auction his extensive collection of Japanese prints at a London sale from Monday 26 to Thursday 29 April 1909.\(^{(9)}\) According to the British novelist and *ukiyo-e* collector Arthur Morrison who wrote the Preface to the auction catalogue for this sale, “Without a shadow of doubt no such important body of Japanese colour prints as regards quality has ever been offered for public sale in this country.”\(^{(10)}\)

The Felton Bequest adviser Frank Gibson (1865-1931) was engaged to purchase prints from this collection. Hall did not trust Gibson’s connoisseurship branding him “another amateur,”\(^{(11)}\) an assessment vindicated by a number of dubious acquisitions he made for the Gallery.\(^{(12)}\) Lacking specialised knowledge in the field, in making his selection, Gibson sought the advice of the English *ukiyo-e* specialist, Edward. F. Strange of the Victoria and Albert Museum.\(^{(13)}\) The NGV purchased fifty-six lots from this sale.\(^{(14)}\) In his selection Gibson seemed conscious of amassing a representative collection within the authorised budget of £500\(^{(15)}\) and in so doing missed major works that would have helped make this an exceptional *ukiyo-e* collection by world standards.\(^{(16)}\) For example, of the Hokusai prints on offer his purchases were between £5 and £7 whilst many of the impressions sold for upwards of £10. One exception was his purchase of one of two impressions of Katsushika Hokusai’s (1760–1849) ‘Under the wave off Kanagawa’ (*Kanagawa oki namiura, 神奈川沖浪裏*) from his c.1830–5 series *Thirty-six views of Mount Fuji* (*Fugaku sanjūrokkei, 富岳三十六景*). The first of these, catalogue no.122, was described as an “[e]xceptionally fine sharp copy”\(^{(17)}\) and the second, catalogue no. 149, as “an exceptionally brilliant impression”\(^{(18)}\) and “…one of the finest examples in existence…”\(^{(19)}\)

Catalogue no. 122 sold for £9/10 shillings and catalogue no. 149 sold for £23/10 shillings to a Mr. Charles Davis.\(^{(20)}\) The NGV purchased the former impression of this work and it has the
hallmarks of a sharp early impression, for example there is no wear to the block often seen in a wide break in the line of the wave behind the boat on the far right and also there are no breaks around the title cartouche. Another feature of later impressions are the background clouds which are, in these impressions, either faded or have disappeared altogether. An impression of this work in New York’s Metropolitan Museum acquired in 1936 is considered the world’s best extant example and has the requisite good colour and contrast between the clouds and the sky. The text for catalogue 149 in the 1909 Happer Collection sale perfectly describes such a quality impression. What detracts from the NGV impression is the condition of the paper with deterioration around the edges, discolouration and a prominent center fold indicating that it was once in an album (see, http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/col/work/22076). The failure of the NGV to acquire the “exceptionally brilliant impression” of this work, as well as Hokusai’s other acknowledged masterpiece from the series; Gaifu Kaisei 函風快晴 which sold for £15/10 shillings must be seen as a lost opportunity. Similarly catalogue no. 480, Utagawa Hiroshige’s (1797–1858) ōban triptych ‘Mountains and Rivers on the Kiso Road’ (Kisoji no yamakawa 木曾路之山川) from an 1857 untitled set of triptychs on the theme of ‘snow’ as part of the traditional subject of setsugekka (‘snow, moon, and flowers’) was purchased for £22 (see, http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/col/work/22265) but the opportunity to complete this three-set ōban triptych series by purchasing the ‘moon and flowers’ triptychs, which sold for £11 and £13 respectively, was bypassed. Gibson did however spend large amounts on a number of works such as £22 for an Utagawa Toyokuni I (1769-1825) five-sheet ōban Ryōgoku Bridge dated by the NGV to c.1805 (Happer catalogue 21), £10 for a Isoda Koryūsai (active c. 1764-88) hashira-e depicting Matsukaze dancing beneath the robe of the courtier Yukihiira, c.1770 (Happer catalogue no. 50) and £20/10 shillings on a Torii Kiyonaga (1752-1815) hashira-e depicting a Courtesan and her attendant at the New Year, dated 1785 (Happer catalogue no. 55).

The still incomplete cataloguing of this collection means that the quality of Strange’s selection can yet be fully assessed. However, if we consider one of the more expensive acquisitions this may give us an indication of what kinds of information a full cataloguing could uncover. For these purposes I looked at Happer catalogue no. 43 purchased by Gibson for the substantial figure of £24, an amount that could have purchased both of Hiroshige’s previously discussed setsugekka triptychs. The work is a vertical chūban by Suzuki Harunobu (1724-1770) illustrating a poem by the poetess Ise (伊勢, c. 875 – c. 938), from an untitled series of Thirty-six Poetic Immortals (Sanjūrokkasen, 三十六歌仙) and signed “Harunobu-ga”. The work has been dated to 1767-68 (Meia 4-5). There are impressions of this work in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston collection and the Art Institute of Chicago to compare the NGV work with. The most striking difference between the three works is the colour. The NGV image has large areas that are pink and green whilst those in the MFA & AIC images are yellow and orange.
effect of colour fading in the American impressions makes it difficult to ascertain the true colours used by Harunobu but the popularity of Harunobu prints meant that later printers made colour changes to his original concept and this seems to be what has happened here for in the NGV impression there is a reduced palette with a uniform colour used on the external verandah and the tokonoma of the interior with a corresponding lack of contrast between interior and exterior that does not run true with Hokusai’s use of colour. Further analysis of the colourants may determine why there are these discrepancies but these features indicate that the NGV work is probably a later printing coloured without Harunobu’s input. Up to this point the NGV impression has not been fully catalogued nor has it been included in any NGV ukiyo-e catalogued exhibition.

The absence of full cataloguing of the collection indicates lack of research prior to acquisition with the selection being dictated by what both Gibson and later the Assistant Director of the NGV Dr. Ursula Hoff (1909-2005) described as a “representative collection” of works by major ukiyo-e artists. Budgetary restraints also contributed to this for Gibson was conscious of staying within budget as he had been criticised by Hall for making overly expensive purchases and this sale was remarkable for the high prices it realised. However, the ukiyo-e purchases only represented seventeen percent of the overall NGV acquisitions spending in that year so more prints could have been purchased if there had been the incentive to do so. This was especially regrettable considering that, according to Cox, during the period in which Gibson was the Felton advisor Felton Bequest acquisition funds “...were, to a considerable degree wasted” with the exception being, as noted later by Ursula Hoff, his acquisitions from the Happer sale. Thus, although this acquisition broke new ground for Australian collections in retrospect it must be seen as a lost opportunity to have stimulated the NGV into developing a world class ukiyo-e collection. Positive newspaper reports at the time confirm that there was recognition of the importance of these ukiyo-e acquisitions outside the NGV and this may have led Gibson to couch his later correspondence to the Felton Committee in terms that highlighted his ‘expertise’ for in the following year when acquisitions funds were allocated for the purchase of more prints he infers that he was drawing upon his own expertise when he stated that, “…there are still two masters who are inadequately represented in the collection, namely, Utamaro and Hiroshige and Mr. Strange agrees with me [my italics] that an attempt ought to be made to make the collection quite complete by purchasing good example[s] of both these great Masters of Japan...” In the same year the NGV purchased works by both these artists at a Sotheby, Wilkinson and Hodge London auction of the collection of the Canadian Col. H. Appleton held between Monday 20th and Thursday 23rd June 1910. However in 1913 when Gibson approached the Felton Committee to purchase further ukiyo-e prints his request was denied. Unfortunately, a curatorial approach
of only seeking an illustrative collection reinforced by Gibson’s statement that with further purchases of works by Utamaro and Hiroshige the collection would be “quite complete” as well as later curatorial and directorial disinterest the collection was stymied in its development. It was not until the period 1932-34 that there were further additions to the NGV Japanese print collection with purchases of the first prints from the modern Shin Hanga movement by Yoshida Hiroshi (1876-1950) and a number of ukiyo-e acquisitions including a bequest in 1934 of three Utagawa School prints, two by Utagawa Kunisada I (1786-1865) and one by Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1798-1861) from the estate of the pioneer of women in medical practice in Melbourne Dr Lilian Alexander (1861–1934).

Post WWII development, research and exhibition

The impact of the Great Depression and two world wars impinged upon the development of the NGV collection however it was disinterest on the part of NGV directors and Asian art curators who favored Chinese art over other Asian art that most adversely affected the development of the collection of Japanese prints and Japanese art in general. Further, departmental division within the NGV curatorial structure meant that all works on paper were the responsibility of the Prints and Drawing Department rather than Asian art which meant that the successive Asian art curators, after the first appointment in 1938, could factor out ukiyo-e prints allowing them to focus their attention on their main interest, the Chinese collection. In the post WWII period there was no print collections policy that included ukiyo-e and what acquisitions that did occur were overseen by an uninformed Council of Trustees whose priorities were with European and Australian prints. At this time it was Dr. Ursula Hoff who was responsible for the ukiyo-e collection.

A specialist in Dutch seventeenth century painting Hoff played a formative role in the development of the print collection at the National Gallery of Victoria where she became Assistant Keeper in 1943 and Keeper in 1948. She was the Assistant Director of the NGV from 1968 until 1973. In 1946, the University of Melbourne was the first Australian university to found a Department of Fine Arts and Hoff had a part-time position there as a visiting lecturer and was a Senior Associate from 1973-78. Hoff worked alongside the inaugural Herald Chair of Fine Arts in this department, Joseph Burke, a specialist in English eighteenth-century art, Australian art historian Bernard Smith and Viennese art historian Franz Philip. There were no Asian art expertise amongst this group and their focus on European and Australian art set the tone for art history studies at this University, a situation that remains until the present day. Numerous graduates from this program, including the Director of the NGV until 2012 Gerard Vaughan, influenced the direction of collections and exhibitions in Australia. The lack of ongoing Asian art expertise in this leading department has played a significant role in the
underdevelopment of Australian scholarship and curatorship of Asian art, including Japanese art. Of more concern is that this lack of expertise has resulted in Australian trained art historians and curators with little background in this area dealing with Japanese art with the obvious risks of errors and omissions.\(^{(44)}\) For example, in Hoff's 1983 publication, *The Felton Bequest*, outlining important NGV acquisitions enabled by the Felton Bequest it is significant that neither their *ukiyo-e* collection, nor any other Japanese art rates a mention. The unstated reasons for this omission is that they were considered a supplementary collection important because of their high status in the west, the way they informed the history of European art movements such as Impressionism and the contribution they made to the history of printmaking. A "representative collection" was all that was needed to achieve these aims.

There has never been an indication that the 1909-10 acquisitions were to form the core of a growing collection area even though an exhibition of 114 prints in 1947 was popularly received.\(^{(45)}\) In 1957 a Melbourne resident James Oki, who was also the NGV trustee Kenneth Myer's Japanese calligraphy teacher,\(^{(46)}\) was employed to catalogue the collection but there is no record of this being published.\(^{(47)}\) In 1966 there were some significant acquisitions, in particular the purchases of a Katsushika Hokusai ink sketch and a *yakusha-e* by Tōshūsai Sharaku (active 1794 - 1795), the first *ukiyo-e* in the post war period acquired with Felton Bequest funds. There was however no attempt to develop a collection policy related to *ukiyo-e* that would have helped steer the development of the collection.\(^{(48)}\) Instead there was a reiteration of the method of relying on the recommendation of Felton Bequest advisors who did not have expertise in Japanese art, in this case the English Museum director and Gainsborough scholar Mary Woodall (1901-88)\(^{(49)}\) who herself had to seek the advice of specialists. Consequently, although subsequent *ukiyo-e* acquisitions were quality ones, they were not based upon a considered collection policy and thus did not result in a well-rounded collection. In fact Woodall herself was not given a brief about the collection and in 1966 wrote that, "[i]t would be interesting to know rather more about the collection of Japanese prints in the Gallery, in order to formulate what works would be a desirable group to aim at."\(^{(50)}\) So continued a pattern of relying on overseas 'specialists' to advise on a collection that had no policy and was overseen by curatorial staff with little or no background in the subject.

In 1977 the NGV exhibited part of its collection of *ukiyo-e* prints and other works from its Japanese art collection, along with art works from China, Persia, India, Tibet, and Southeast Asia, in a touring exhibition, *The arts of Asia*.\(^{(51)}\) Although there was a curator overseeing the Asian art collection, her preoccupation with the Chinese art collection led to the exhibition being curated by John Guy who was at the time the Circulations Officer.\(^{(52)}\) Without the linguistic or the cultural knowledge, in his research for this exhibition Guy had relied on Mr Chew Wai Tong, a Chinese art consultant for his ability to read Chinese characters. Chew Wai
Tong also made an attempt at cataloguing the *ukiyo-e* collection but without the specialised knowledge he was unable to complete the task.

In terms of development, research and exhibition there was little done with the Japanese art collection until 1989 when James Mollison became director of the National Gallery of Victoria, a position he held until 1995. Mollison had moved to this position from the National Gallery of Australia where he had been the inaugural director from 1977 to 1990. His previous position as an Education Officer at the National Gallery of Victoria in 1960 and 1961 would have made him aware of the NGV Japanese collection and in particular their *ukiyo-e* print holdings. As has been mentioned earlier the various curators of Asian art at the NGV had allowed the Prints & Drawings Department to oversee the *ukiyo-e* prints. Thus, in 1990, when an exhibition of *ukiyo-e* was being planned the Senior Curator of Asian Art Dr. Mae Anna Pang was questioning whether the *ukiyo-e* collection was her responsibility.\(^{(53)}\) However, Mollison rightly saw the responsibility for the *ukiyo-e* as being with the Asian art Department and thus both acquisitions leading up to and planning for the exhibition was undertaken by Pang, a task for which she later astutely thanked him.\(^{(54)}\)

In this period Mollison thus stimulated renewed activity in the acquisition of *ukiyo-e* prints as well as Japanese art generally. But with no background in Japanese art there was the danger that in his taking the advice of non-specialist curatorial staff the collection would suffer through lack of informed research and development. In 1993, Mollison stated that \"[w]e began two years ago an investigation of the quality and nature of the collection of Japanese prints in this collection. We found the existing collection inadequate as the basis for an exhibition. Trustees agree[d] to allow us to pursue the acquisition of Japanese prints to enable the mounting of a first class show.\"\(^{(55)}\) This assessment, delivered to Trustees who did not have the knowledge to verify this judgment, was based upon research by staff who had little or no background in *ukiyo-e*\(^{(56)}\) and who sought the advice of an overseas dealer\(^{(57)}\) who was not an authority. This was a puzzlingly situation considering that at a time there was specialist advice available both on staff and elsewhere in Melbourne.\(^{(58)}\) The lack of depth in this investigation is revealed by the absence of any published assessment nor a completed catalogue of the collection.

Considering these circumstances it is not surprising that in terms of quality and importance there is no comparison between the pre-1993 *ukiyo-e* collection deemed as \"inadequate\" by Mollison and the subsequent acquisitions of late Edo and early Meiji period prints, even though they filled a gap in the historical representation of the history of *ukiyo-e*. Mollison’s assessment seems to have been based purely upon the sensational visual appeal of these colourful *ukiyo-e* many dealing with warrior subjects (*musha-e* and *yakusha-e*). The lack of depth in the development of the collection is demonstrated by repetition of content in subsequent NGV *ukiyo-e* exhibitions. The result of this period of investigation and acquisitions was the 1993
exhibition of selected prints from the collection curated by Dr Mae Anna Pang and an article by
her on Japanese woodblock prints in the 1994 edition of the Art Bulletin of Victoria but there
was no catalogue and only a small Education Guide.\(^{(69)}\)

This came at a time when both the Art Gallery of New South Wales and the National
Gallery of Australia were appointing curators with a specialization in Japanese art history\(^{(60)}\)
who were researching and developing their institution’s collections. These curators were also
mounting exhibitions that profiled, through loans and research, works from the NGV *ukiyo-e*
collection. The most significant of these was the 1998 NGA exhibition *Beauty & Desire in Edo
Period Japan* which the then Director of the NGA Brian Kennedy labelled as “one of the most
popular Asian art exhibitions we have ever staged at the National Gallery of Australia.”\(^{(61)}\) In
comparing the situation at the NGV and the AGNSW Dr Caroline Turner, the former Deputy
Director of the Queensland Art Gallery and Deputy Director of the Humanities Research Centre
at the Australian National University noted that in the 1980s the NGV “…had the more
important collection of Asian art, but it was the AGNSW that began to present an array of
exciting Asian historical exhibitions, including from China, Japan and India, and to build a
highly significant Asian collection.”\(^{(62)}\) Mollison was thus reacting to a greater public awareness
of Japanese art and expectation for the NGV to do more with their *ukiyo-e* and Japanese
collection in general.

In 2005 the collection was again displayed in the exhibition *Pictures of the Floating World:
Japanese Prints from the Collection*.\(^{(63)}\) In an admission about the underutilization of this
collection the then NGV Director, Gerard Vaughan noted at the time that these, “…works that
are so rarely seen… were purchased as far back as 1909, and this really is a unique opportunity
to be able to see them.”\(^{(64)}\) This was an oversight on the part of Vaughan for this 2005 exhibition
was essentially a repeat of the earlier 1993 exhibition with the majority of works from that
exhibition reshown and under the same themes of Yoshiwara *bijin*, Kabuki *yaksha-e*, *musha-e*,
and landscape. Further, the essay in the 1993 Education Guide ‘Actors, Courtesans, Warriors
and Travellers’ is substantially repeated in the 2005 catalogue ‘Pictures of the Floating World’
as were the label texts.\(^{(65)}\)

**Postscript**

In 1906 the Felton Bequest gave the NGV an acquisition budget greater than than of London’s
National and Tate galleries combined. This was to benefit the NGV Japanese art collection with
the acquisition in 1909-10 of *ukiyo-e* prints. But, instead of these acquisitions providing the
foundations for a growing collection, an uninformed approach to collecting saw these
acquisitions as providing a completed “representative collection.” Subsequent curatorial apathy
towards the collection further stymied its development. The still incomplete cataloguing of this
collection from 1909-10, their late conservation, the neglect in research and publication about the works, their unavailability on-line as well as the lack of trained staff leads to the conclusion that this important collection has and continues to suffer from cultural exclusion.

Works Cited:
*Dictionary of Art Historians* (website). “Mary Woodall.”
Transformation of Australian Studies in a Globalising Age


Free Gallery Archives, Washington.


Letter from Gibson to the Chairman of the Felton Bequest Committee, 4 February 1910, NGV Felton Correspondence, The Shaw Research Library, NGV.


“Minutes of the meeting of the Felton Purchase Committee.” 20 November 1913. SLV MSF 12855 vol.63.


NGV Memorandum dated December 17, 1990.


Notes:
(1) Accession number 2005-D1A, gold and lacquer on wood 19.9 x 7.4cm diameter. The first recorded acquisition of an Asian art work was by the NGV in 1862. see, Richard D. Woolcott, ‘Comment’, in TAASA Review, Vol 7 No.1 Mar 1998, p.3.
(2) The first Director from 1882–91 was the Irish painter G. F. Folingsby.
(4) NGV records show this works as being accessioned in 1907.
(6) On the advice of the NGV Trustees de Vasselot was given the generous sum of 1000 pounds to acquire works of art. The inen seal screen is the only Japanese work he acquired for the NGV. Marquet de Vasselot’s demonstrated connoisseurship has been called into question by a number of European art specialists such as Professor Jaynie Anderson of Melbourne University who states that, “I have recently been in correspondence with Marc Bascou at the Musée du Louvre about his predecessor. Marquet de Vasselot may have exaggerated his activities for acquisitions at the Louvre for he talks more about the art market than about actual pieces.” Jaynie Anderson, ‘Le Musée Imaginaire’ and Museums within Walls’, in Mineo Nakajima (ed.), Proceedings Akita University International Conference 2008 André Malraux, His Philosophy and Art – Temptations of the Orient and Japan, Akita: Akita International University Press, 2008, p. 85.
(7) A term first coined in Phillips, Arthur Angel (January 2006). A. A. Phillips on the Cultural Cringe. Melbourne University Publishing. It refers to the assumption that Australian knowledge is inferior to that of the British and European counterparts.
Transformation of Australian Studies in a Globalising Age


On 17 June 1907 Happer wrote to Charles Lang Freer (1854–1919) who had recently given his large collection of Asian and American art to the American government in Washington, a gift that would later become the foundation for the Freer Gallery which opened public in 1923. Wanting to keep his collection in tact Happer suggested they be purchased by Freer stating that, “...until the last few weeks I have had no intention of disposing of it; [however] family reasons have now decided me to dispose of it...” Free Gallery archives, Washington.

(9) Catalogue of The Happer Collection of Japanese Colour Prints, Sotheby, Wilkinson & Hodge, Wellington Street, Strand, , London: Dryden Press, 1909. Monday 26 April Lots 1-180 (day’s total £1,452.18s.6d.), Tuesday 27 April Lots 181-355 (day’s total £1,334.18s.6d.), Wednesday 28 April Lots 356-526 (day’s total £1,919.8s.6d.), and Thursday 29 April 1909 Lots 527-708 (approx. day’s total £1,305.7s.6d.). The total realised for the Happer sale was £6,013. see, ‘Japanese prints. Happer sale ended. £6,013 realised’, in The Daily Telegraph, Friday 30 April, 1909.


(12) For example, in 1910 Gibson purchased a work by Watteau that was, in 1945, found to be a copy. John Poynter, Mr. Felton’s Bequests, Melbourne: The Miegunyah Press, Melbourne: Melbourne University Publishing Ltd., 2003, p.290.


(14) Catalogue of The Happer Collection of Japanese Colour Prints, Sotheby, Wilkinson & Hodge, Wellington Street, Strand, London Monday 26- Thursday 29 April 1909 with a typed notation of the original copy with “Prints marked G purchased by Gibson, Felton Bequest adviser, on behalf of the National Gallery of Victoria.” Copy held in the NGV library. The number of prints by each artist is as follows: Gaku-tei (x2); Harunobu (x4); Hidemaro (x1); Hiroshige (x1); Hokkei (x1); Hokusai (x12); Kiyomasu (x1); Kiyonaga (x3); Kiyotsune (x1); Korusai (x1); Kuniyoshi (x1); Kyosai (x1); Moronobu (x1); Shigenobu (x1); Shikimaro (x1); Shudo (x1), Shunsho (x2); Shunko (x1); Shunsho (x1); Shunjou (x1); Utagawa Toyokuni (x3); Goshitei Toyokuni (x7); Utamaro (x1); Eisen (x3); Eishi (x1); Eisho (x1); Eizan (x1) and Yoshitora (x1).


(16) It has been suggested that the quality of the purchases could have been compromised by Strange’s dual role at the Happer sale as both adviser to Gibson and as purchaser for the V&A collection. B.W. Robinson, Kuniyoshi, London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1961, p. 61. This suggestion was made in Jack Stuart Chadwick, One hundred years of Japanese ukiyo-e prints at the National Gallery of Victoria, Honours thesis, The University of Melbourne, 2011, p.19.


—205—


‘The Happer Japanese Prints’, in The Morning Post, Tuesday, 27 April, 1909. The news article reported that Davis “was prepared to pay double that amount” for this work.

The British Museum has an impression of this work acquired in 1937 (see, http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/search_the_collection_database/search_object_details.aspx?objectID=8808&partID=1, accessed 23 April 2011) that has both these flaws as well as a darker grey sky seen in later impressions.

According to Prof. dr. M.F.M. (Matti) Forrer, Extraordinary professor at Leiden University Institute for Area Studies, the Netherlands and an expert in the work of Hokusai the three best copies (in descending order) of Hokusai’s Kanagawa oki nami ura are in the Metropolitan Museum, New York (2569), The Guimet Museum, Paris (3285) and the MET (1847).


Catalogue 481, ‘View of Naruto Strait in Awa’ (Awa no Naruto no vükei) sold for £11 and catalogue 482, ‘Evening view of Eight Famous sites at Kanazawa’ (Buyô Kanazawa hashô yakei) sold for £13.

NGV Accession number 433.a-e-2; Utagawa Toyokuni; Ryogoku Bridge. NGV catalogue information provided 23 March 2011 (marked “GUIDE ONLY”).

NGV Accession number 391-2; Isoda KORYUSAI; Sea-water carrier. NGV catalogue information provided 23 March 2011 (marked “GUIDE ONLY”).

NGV Accession number 393-2; Suzuki Harunobu, Famous Poems: Waiting for someone who never comes. NGV catalogue information provided 23 March 2011 (marked “GUIDE ONLY”).


MFA Boston collection accession number 11.30173, William Sturgis Bigelow Collection. The Art Institute of Chicago, Clarence Buckingham Collection, 1925.2115.


In 1910 Gibson stated that, “…a very representative collection of Japanese prints were secured by the Felton Bequest Committee…” Letter from Gibson to the Chairman of the Felton Bequest Committee, 4 February 1910, NGV Felton Correspondence, The Shaw Research Library, NGV. Leonard B. Cox, The National Gallery of Victoria 1861 to 1968, Melbourne: The National Gallery of Victoria, 1, NGV Shaw Research Library records. 968, p. 70.

Poynter, p. 292.


The overall spending on NGV acquisitions in 1909 was £7076, 17s with £510 being spent on acquiring works from the Happer sale. Report of the Trustee of the Public Library, Museums & National Gallery of Victoria 1908/09, p.24. SLV MSF 12855, vol.16.
Transformation of Australian Studies in a Globalising Age


(36) In comparison it was not until the 1940s that the Art Gallery of South Australia began collecting ukiyo-e prints with the Art Gallery of New South Wales following some three decades later. Dick Richards, Japan: Three Worlds, Adelaide: The Art Gallery of South Australia, 1999, p.4, and The Asian Collections: Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2003, p.9

(37) "They will be a decided acquisition to the National Gallery, as they represent the highest form of art in Japan." 'Melbourne Gallery. Japanese prints purchased. The Felton Bequest', in, The Age, 28 April, 1909.

(38) Letter from Gibson to the Chairman of the Felton Bequest Committee, 4 February 1910, NGV Felton Correspondence, The Shaw Research Library, NGV.


(40) Minutes of the meeting of the Felton Purchase Committee, 20 November 1913. SLV MSF 12855


(42) The inaugural (honorary) curator of Oriental art at the NGV Herbert Wade Kent (1877-1952) was a Chinese art specialist as were his successors Leonard Bell Cox (1894-1976) and the current curator Mae Anna Quan Pang (1941-).

(43) These include the art historian Terry Smith and the Felton Bequest adviser Frank Gibson (1865-1931), who advised the NGV on their acquisition of the Happer Collection. Others who were influenced by Hoff and had input into the ukiyo-e collection were James Mollison and Irene Zdanowicz.

(44) In a 2008 paper presented at a conference at Akita International University the Herald Chair of Fine Arts History at the University of Melbourne Jaynie Anderson, a European Renaissance Painting specialist, presented a paper that included a discussion of the NGV Japanese art collection. In her paper she made the point that the NGV ukiyo-e collection was "unstudied" but her discussion underscored how, with non-specialists studying this collection this problem has arisen. In the essay both dated and incorrect transliterations of terms such as "harikiri" for hara-kiri, "Hiakumin isshu Ubagawa Yetoki" for Hyakumin isshu uba ga etoki, and "Hachirakaki" for hashira-e) are used as well as inaccuracies such as, "...Pillar Prints [being] used to decorate a Japanese house with representations of Geisha..." see, Jaynie Anderson, 'Le Musée Imaginaire'and Museums within Walls', in Mieno Nakajima (ed.), Proceedings Akita University International Conference: André Malroux, His Philosophy and Art – Temptations of the Orient and Japan, Akita: Akita International University Press, 2008, pp. 81-95.


In this year Ursula Hoff reported that, “Mr. James Oki was employed by the Trustees to catalogue the collection of about one hundred and eighty Japanese prints and gave valuable service in translating inscribed titles. This work is still in progress.” Later Hoff reported that Oki had, “…nearly finished his assignment. The woodcuts have been re-labeled, where necessary.” Annual Report, 1957, ‘Report of the National Gallery of Victoria with Statement of Income and Expenditure for the Twelve Months Ended 30th June 1957’, p.13. PROV 805/P00004/24. Recent research has shown that this catalogue was not published and drafts are not locatable. see, Jack Stuart Chadwick, One hundred years of Japanese ukiyo-e prints at the National Gallery of Victoria, Honours thesis, The University of Melbourne, 2011, p.28.

“The Department of Prints and Drawings was now to benefit by other acquisitions: in April the Adviser (Dr Woodall) recommended purchase of a drawing by the great Japanese 19th century artist Hokusai at auction, to which Mr Thomson had drawn her attention. She thought it a ‘very fine drawing’, and both Mr Basil Gray of the British Museum, and Mr Bryan Morgan of Bluett’s, supported purchase up to a figure of £2,500. Agreement being given it was obtained for £520. At the same sale her attention had been drawn to a rare print by Sharaku. With the approval of the same authorities bidding was allowed up to £2,200; it was obtained for £1,500.” The National Gallery of Victoria 1861 to 1968 A Search for a Collection, 1968, p.361. Other acquisitions around this time included three prints by Utagawa Kunimasa (893-5), Utagawa Kunisada II (894.a-c-5), and Katsukawa Shunzan (900.a-c-5) purchased in 1961 for £430. The National Gallery of Victoria 1861 to 1968 A Search for a Collection, 1968, p.303.


Letter no.18 from Woodall to the Secretary, The Felton Trustees 26th April 1966. PROV 805/P00004/34 quoted in Jack Stuart Chadwick, One hundred years of Japanese ukiyo-e prints at the National Gallery of Victoria, Honours thesis, The University of Melbourne, 2011, p.32.

John Guy, exhibition catalogue, The arts of Asia, Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria 1977. In 1982 at the Monash University Visual Arts Gallery there was an exhibition, ‘Glimpses of Ukiyo-e: Japanese art of the late Tokugawa period’ that also included borrowed works from the NGV.

Guy was not a Japanese art specialist and was later to develop his research interests in Indian temple arts and India’s cultural relations with Southeast Asia in the fields of sculpture and textiles to become Senior Curator for South and Southeast Asian Art at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

In a correspondence between Pang and the Senior Curator, Prints & Drawings, Dr. Irena Zdanowicz Pang asked “Would your department be responsible for the exhibition?” NGV Memorandum dated December 17, 1990.


Those who have worked on this exhibition were Dr. Mae Anna Pang, a Chinese art specialist and Geoffrey Burke, a Registration Officer with no background in Japanese art.

Many of these prints, including a July 1993 AU$33,386.15 acquisition of prints by Tsukioka Yoshitoshi, Utagawa Sadahide, Utagawa Kunisada I, Toyoharu Kunichika and Kamigata-e actor prints.

These included the current author who was on staff at the NGV and Professor William Coaldrome, the Head of Japanese studies at the University of Melbourne who is an authority of Japanese architecture. Further when, in 1993, the foremost authority on ukiyo-e Professor Kobayashi Tadashi of Gakushuin University, Tokyo asked to see the collection he was told the curator was not available. Personal observations by the author.


Gary Hickey was appointed as Curator (later Senior Curator) of Asian art at the NGV in 1994 and Chiaki Ajioka was appointed as Curator of Japanese Art at the AGNSW in 1996 although she had been working there part time prior to that.

See, 10th April 1999 letters from Brian Kennedy to Mr Hideki Hayashida, Commissioner, Agency for Cultural Affairs, NGA, File: 94/0232. “A total of 13,166 people visited the exhibition, an average of 472 persons a day. It was one of the most popular Asian art exhibitions we have ever staged at the National Gallery of Australia. In addition, 11,220 students visited the Gallery during the period of the exhibition and were taken on guided tours through Beauty & Desire. The exhibition was supported by an extensive education programme that presented many aspects of Japanese culture. There was also a highly successful seminar dealing with Edo period art, where prominent Japanese art specialists from Australia, America and Japan were guest speakers. The exhibition catalogue sold out in Australia and 2,000 copies were taken by Thames and Hudson for distribution in the United States of America.”


Forty-one prints from the 1909 Happer Collection purchase were shown by the NGV in an earlier exhibition, Actors Courtesans Warriors and Travellers: Japanese Woodblock Prints from the collection of the National Gallery of Victoria 12 August – 25 October 1993. In preparing for this exhibition the Senior Curator, Asian Art Dr. Mae Anna Pang was unsure whether or not the ukiyo-e prints were the responsibility of the Asian Art Department. In a correspondence between her and the Senior Curator, Prints & Drawings, Dr. Irena Zdanowic Pang asked “Would your department be responsible for the exhibition?” NGV Memorandum dated December 17, 1990.

“More than 100 Japanese woodblocks will be on display together for the first time ever in the exhibition, Pictures of the Floating World: Japanese Prints from the Collection” at the NGV International from 22 April – 2 October 2005. See, http://durer.ngv.vic.gov.au/ngv-media?sq_content_src=%2BdXJsPWh0dHA1M0EIMkYlmkZ3d3cubmd2LnZpYy5nb3YuYXUIMkZt

For example, the current catalogue information for NGV catalogue no. 460-2 (“Gosotei TOYOKUNI; Loyal League of 47 Ronin in Ukiyoe [Ukiyo-e] - Act 9”- catalogue information supplied by the Registration Department, NGV, dated March 24, 2011), a Felton Bequest purchase from the Happer collection sale of 1909 (sale no. 633, one of three prints by Toyokuni) has not been updated from the 1909 text (“TOYOKUNI (Gosotei), from the CHIUSHINGURA series, the Ninth Scene”). The 1986 card index for this work incorrectly titles the work as “Yoichi of the House of Wakasa in front of the (Shiba) Shrine” (a mistake in reading the publisher’s name as the title of the work). In the 1990 updated card index this error was not corrected. The full catalogue should read: Utagawa Toyokuni I (歌川豊国) (1769 - 1825), Act IX (kyudamme), from the series Perspective Pictures of the Storehouse of Loyal Retainers (Uki-e Chūshingura), 1795 (circa), Kansei Era, Publisher: Wakasaya Yoichi. The picture shows a view of Obooshi Yuronosuke’s residence in Yamashina, close to Kyoto, from Act IX, ‘Yamashina kankyo’, of the play ‘Kanadehon Chushingura’ by Takeda Izumo II, Miyoshi Shoraku and Namiki Senryu. In the room closest to the picture plane is Yuronosuke himself with five others. In the room furthest away on the left is Honzo’s wife Tonase with a sword raised above her head about to kill their daughter Konami; outside the garden gate, disguised as an itinerant ‘komuso’ priest and wearing a deep sedge hat with a bamboo shakuhachi in his hand is Tonase’s husband Kakogawa Honzo. As an historical record it is worth noting that early descriptions of the *ukiyo-e* medium used the western term “woodcut”, a different printing process. Indicative of a probable backlog in cataloguing the NGV ukiyo-e collection catalogue still uses both “woodcut” along with the correct term “woodblock [-print]” (mokuhanga).

As highlighted in a memorandum between the NGV Paper Conservator, Anne V. Cotter-Ross and the Senior Curator, Asian Art, Dr Mae Anna Pang. When preparing for the 1993 exhibition *Actors Courtesans and Warriors and Travellers: Japanese Woodblock Prints from the collection of the National Gallery of Victoria* Cotter-Ross noted that, “…their [the print’s] condition which is generally degraded…” Even though it was almost one hundred years after their acquisition Cotter-Ross went on to note that prints were “…extremely discoloured with residual bleaching problems [and] with taped sections i.e. triptychs” such as with the Kikugawa Eizan triptych, ‘Three beauties playing a sake drinking game’, acc. no. 405.a-c-2, purchased as part of the 1909 Happer collection sale. NGV Memorandum dated 6 June 1991.

Whilst the appointment in 2010 of the print artist Wayne Croters as Asian art curator offers the opportunity to do more with the collection the unwillingness to seek out specialist staff reflects an ongoing lack of commitment to this important collection.