

# UKIYO-E SOCIETY OF AMERICA, INC.

NOTES FROM THE PRESIDENT

MAY - JUNE 1995



## BLUE AND WHITE JAPAN

Dr. Henry Smith, Professor of Japanese History at Columbia University, was our speaker on May 23rd. Dr. Smith, author and lecturer who has lived in Japan, is known among scholars and collectors of ukiyo-e prints for his valuable contributions to ukiyo-e studies, including *Hiroshige: 100 Views of Edo*; *Kiyochika, Art of Meiji Japan*; and *Hokusai: 100 Views of Mt. Fuji*. Dr. Smith is a member of the Society and serves on the Board of Directors. A summary of his lecture follows.

### BLUE AND WHITE JAPAN, 1700 - 1900: INDIGO, PORCELAIN, AND BERLIN BLUE IN THE TRANSFORMATION OF EVERYDAY LIFE.

I want to describe how my study of a single ukiyo-e print, like a pebble cast into a still pond, has led me outwards in ever-widening circles, obliging me to think about linkages with other areas of the material culture of early modern Japan. These explorations have led me to postulate an interlocking pattern that I would like to call "Blue-and-White Japan."

The print is one that I have introduced briefly before (in an earlier talk to this society, and at the Hokusai conference in Venice one year ago), and will be discussing in detail in a forthcoming issue of *Ukiyo-e geijutsu*. It is a summer fan print executed entirely in the imported chemical pigment of Berlin blue, depicting a Chinese landscape. The print was designed by Keisai Eisen, published by the fan-maker Iseya Sōbei (Daieidō), and bears a year seal for 1829. I believe that this is the very print which, according to a miscellany (*Masaki no kazura*) written by the Edo bookseller Seisōdō Tōho, began the great boom in Berlin blue that transformed the entire color balance of the ukiyo-e print for the next four decades.

This single print and its striking blue aesthetic then began to lead me in other directions. For one thing, the Chinese-style landscape design by Eisen seemed curiously similar to patterns on blue and white

porcelain. This led me to explore the history of Japanese ceramics, and to discover that the early 19th century was a time in which the manufacture of porcelain, previously confined largely to Kyushu, had "suddenly burst its bounds and quickly spread throughout the nation."<sup>1</sup> In Kyushu itself, new kilns were established to produce blue and white wares, such as the large plates (*ōzara*) of Shida ware that often bore Chinese-style designs like that on Eisen's print. But perhaps even more importantly, the great pottery complex at Seto began producing porcelains in large quantity for the first time, and was surely instrumental in increasing the flow of blue-and-white wares to ordinary homes both in Edo and throughout central and eastern Japan.

The Eisen print then led in the direction of still another blue, that of indigo, since it became apparent that even before the extensive use of Berlin blue in *nishiki-e* prints after 1829 (enabled, we know from the research of Professor Sasaki Seiichi, by a sudden drop in the price of imported pigment), ukiyo-e prints of the two reigning masters, Eisen and Kunisada, were already taking on decidedly blue tones, some even in the solid-blue type known as *aizuri*. The major colorant available for these blues (other than the very pale and fugitive dayflower blue, *aigami*) was the natural dye of indigo--although some have raised the possibility of the addition of such minerals as azurite or smalt. I was particularly interested to discover that the "indigo sticks" (*aibō* or *airō*) used by painters and printers were prepared by boiling down and extracting the dye from used rags of indigo-dyed cotton.

This led in turn to an exploration of the history of blue-and-white cotton in Japan. Cotton progressed from a luxury import from China and Korea in the Muromachi period, to the beginnings of cotton cultivation in Japan in the 16th century for primarily military uses, and then to the steady spread of the new fiber as the preferred material for ordinary wear by the majority of Japanese during the Edo period.<sup>2</sup> Until this time, most Japanese, particularly farmers, wore rough fabrics laboriously processed from a wide variety of bast fibers such as hemp, ramie, wisteria, and kuzu.<sup>3</sup> But from the

eighteenth century into the nineteenth, the wearing of cotton began an inexorable spread into the furthest reaches of the Japanese archipelago. The bulk of the cotton was dyed with indigo in a variety of techniques, and cultivation of both indigo and cotton were crucial to the commercial transformation of the Japanese economy in the Tokugawa period. Even those farmers who could not afford new cotton were able to enjoy the warmth and softness of the fabric by recycling cotton rags (again, much of it indigo-dyed) in the form known as *sakiori*.<sup>4</sup> Thin strips of rag cotton would be used as the thick weft against a warp of strong bast fibers....

In short, it began to occur to me, the entire era from the eighteenth through the nineteenth century (and indeed well into the twentieth) constituted a time in which "blue and white" became a pervasive element in the daily life of the entire Japanese nation, in the form of clothing, bedding, and food-serving utensils. It was a process that was driven at a fundamental level by technological advances in the cultivation of cotton and indigo, and in the manufacture of cotton fabric and porcelain.

Some of the implications of this change were suggested in a well-known essay of 1924 by the Japanese folklore scholar Yanagita Kunio entitled "Before Cotton" (*Momen izen no koto*).<sup>5</sup> As a result of cotton, Yanagita argued, the whole shape of the Japanese body was changed: instead of layers of undergarments, cotton padding now gave a roundness to shoulders and hips; cotton also stretches and shrinks to conform to the shape of the body, producing an aesthetic of smoothly sloping shoulders (*nadegata*) or slim "willow waists" (*yanagigoshi*). Cotton, Yanagita continued, changed the body inside as well, since its soft light feel made the skin of the common people more sensitive. Clothing and body became more as one--and at the same time, Japanese anxiety about nakedness increased. Feelings came to be expressed more in the form of clothing, and the appearance of people hence became more beautiful. Yanagita also included porcelain in his thoughts about cotton. The older wooden bowls cracked easily, and became dirty and smelly. But with porcelain, glistening white objects reached into the darkest recesses of the

home, giving new brightness and pleasure in the auspicious designs of pines and cranes, and teaching the Japanese that whiteness is cleanliness.

I would broaden this discussion to propose that the "blue-and-white" transformation of the material culture of Japan created a new aesthetic--or rather a changing set of linked aesthetics. We can look at two different spatial axes: one I would call "Japan and Not-Japan" and the other "city and country."<sup>6</sup> In the world of Blue-and-White Japan, "Not-Japan" was primarily the world of East and Southeast Asia, a world with which Japan had dynamic trade links, particularly in ceramics, throughout the Edo period. We can see this Asia depicted, in a style that might be called "*Kara*," on many of the porcelains of Hizen. Blue was also associated with the Dutch, by way of the expanses of cloud-dotted blue skies that were introduced into Japanese prints by way of Dutch influences (although China was often the intermediary). The art historian Kobayashi Tadashi has even argued that the pale dayflower blue backgrounds (now largely faded) in a number of Harunobu's prints are a sign of a certain exoticism and yearning for the West.<sup>7</sup> My own feeling is that this argument is far more persuasive for the *megane-e* of Maruyama Okyo or the etchings of Shiba Kōkan, the earliest examples of cloud-filled blue-skies in Japanese prints.

This in turn brings us back to Eisen's Berlin-blue fan print as a fantasy of precisely this *Kara*, the generic Asian-likeness. This links in turn with the emergent aesthetic of Berlin Blue in the landscape prints of the 1830s. Landscape prints had evolved as windows of sorts, always implying a broader world.<sup>8</sup> One of the many associations of the color blue for the people of Edo was with wide skies, open seas, and links to exotic foreign lands--associations that were encouraged and maintained by the many Chinese-style motifs in Hizen porcelain. All of this reminds us that we must be careful not to play into an aesthetic of blue-and-white as anything peculiarly Japanese. Not only were cotton cultivation and porcelain manufacture both brought from China and Korea, cobalt and Berlin blue continued throughout the Edo period to be imported by Chinese and Dutch traders. The world of blue-and-white had its

roots outside Japan, and continued to grow on a global scale. Indigo-dyed cotton and porcelain spread throughout much of the world in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, from China and India and Africa into Europe and the American colonies. Indigo-blue cotton, in the current form of "blue-jeans," has in fact become a form of universal casual wear in the late twentieth century.

Even before the rural/urban dynamic began to generate the world of Blue-and-White Japan, there seems to have emerged a folklore of indigo blue. Although blue colors were of low status among the ancient nobility, the deepest, most "navy" blue, was known as *kachi*, a word that also meant victory in battle. In a belief that may have some scientific support, it was also widely believed that indigo blue protected against the bites of snakes and gnats. But these beliefs did not distinguish between city and country. It has really only been in the modern period that any lines between the rural and urban aesthetics of blue-and-white might have become an issue. It did become an issue in the notion of "folk art," which was given its clearest ideological formulation in the twentieth century in the Mingei movement launched by Yanagi Sôetsu, and is sustained today by many tasteful collectors. There is even a mingei boutique in the Azabu area of Tokyo named "Blue and White."<sup>9</sup>

The urban aesthetic takes us back to Edo, its prints and culture. Woodblock prints themselves are perhaps one of the most fruitful places to turn for evidence of the aesthetic, in the patterns of summer *yukatas*, the preference for the stripes and checks that were so easily woven in cotton, the design of *tenuki* towels, and the evidence for widespread use of porcelain utensils.

One distinctive variant of the blue-and-white aesthetic of Edokko was tattooing, an art that grew largely out of ukiyo-e, using the designs of Kuniyoshi's warrior prints, and referring to its products as "carvings" (*horimono*). The dominant hue of tattoos was the blue of indigo, from indigo sticks (recycled from cotton, remember) that now dyed the skin itself rather than the cotton fabric that Yanagita claimed to be transforming so many other bodies.

I have been coming to think that "Blue-and-White Japan" might even make an interesting theme for a museum exhibition, and would welcome the advice and assistance of those more knowledgeable than myself in the various specialized areas of material culture into which Eisen's fan print seems inexorably to have led me. It is by unraveling the web of trade and material culture that constituted Japan on a national scale throughout the nineteenth century that we will begin to understand that what we see as "traditional Japan" took its mature shape in the last decades of Edo and the first decades of Meiji.

As a brief postscript, let me simply record the lines of Lafcadio Hearn that were quoted for us by Gabriele Grunebaum at the conclusion of this talk, from his essay "My First Day in the Orient," in which he describes his first impression of Japan as one of "the little houses under their blue roofs, the little shop-fronts hung with blue, and the smiling little people in their blue costumes."

NOTES:

1. Mikami Tsugio, *The Art of Japanese Ceramics* (Heibonsha/Weatherhill, 1972), p.183
2. For a historian's account of the transformation, see Nagahara Keiji, *Shin Momen Izen no koto: Choma kara momen e* (Chôkô shinsho # 963, 1990).
3. For a concise and revealing account of the complex bast fiber traditions of Japan, see Louise Cort, "Bast Fibers," in William Jay Rathbun, ed., *Beyond the Tanabata Bridge: Traditional Japanese Textiles* (Thames and Hudson, with the Seattle Art Museum, 1993), pp. 37-44. For further details, see *Riches from Rags* (following note).
4. See Shin-Ichiro Yoshida and Dai Williams, *Riches from Rags: Saki-ori & Other Recycling Traditions in Japanese Rural Clothing*. Exhibition catalog, San Francisco Craft and Folk Art Museum, 1994. I am grateful to Lynn Gibor for bringing this book to my attention.
5. The article first appeared in *Josei* magazine, October 1924. It is reprinted in the *Yanagita Kunio zenshû*, Chikuma bunko editio (Chikuma shobô, 1990), vol. 17, pp. 12-20.
6. I have discussed the "city and country" distinction in "Kyô ni inaka ari versus Rus in urbe: City and Country in Japan and England." *Senri Ethnological Studies*, 19 (1986), 29-39.

7. Kobayashi Tadashi, "Aoi sora--Harunobu to sono shōhen," in Nakamura Shin'ichirō, et al., *Harunobu--Bijinga to enpon* (Shinchōsha, 1992), pp. 66-74.
8. For one example, see my "World Without Walls: Kuwagata Keisai's Panoramic Vision of Japan." In Gail Bernstein and Haruhiro Fukui, eds., *Japan and the World--Essays on Japanese History and Politics in Honour of Ishida Takeshi* (The Macmillan Press, London, 1988), pp. 3-19.
9. See the recent book by the owner of "Blue and White": Amy Sylvester Katoh with photographs by Shin Kimura, Japanese Country Living: Spirit--Tradition--Style (Tuttle, 1993).

Henry Smith

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