

Ukiyo-e Printmaking

Author Janine Defeo

Video documenting “[The Ukiyo-e Technique: Traditional Japanese Printmaking](#),” produced by the Freer|Sackler Gallery:

In this video produced by the Freer|Sackler, the branch of the Smithsonian devoted to Asian Art, Japanese Master Printmaker Keiji Shinohara makes a ukiyo-e print from the Edo-era [Sixty-nine Stations of the Kiso Kaidō](#) series. As he makes the print, he narrates his process. At 17 minutes, the video is not short, but I have found the length of the video helps students appreciate how much craftsmanship and manual skill goes into the making of these woodblock prints, enhancing our discussions of reproducible media.

Learning Goals

After completing this activity, students will be able to:

- Explain technical and material aspects of the woodblock printing process.
- Analyze how the technique of woodblock printing impacts the resulting visual form of the print.

Activity

- I introduce the woodblock printing process as it existed in the Edo period first in general terms – explaining collaborative work of the artist, carver and printer orchestrated by a publisher. The video documents only the printing process, so I find it useful to explain the preceding steps. (This entry in the [Heilbrunn Timeline](#) is helpful.)
- Students watch the Freer|Sackler Gallery’s video on ukiyo-e printing while working on a series of guided questions—questions that direct them through the watching of the video and also structure reflection afterward (sample attached)
- After discussing the video and the handout (as a class or in small groups), students can practice applying their insights to the analysis of unseen ukiyo-e prints – picking out examples of bold outlines, areas of flat color, stylized gradation, etc.

Ukiyo-e Printmaking Handout

During the Video

1. How does the printer handle the application of colors and their modulation/gradation?
2. How does the printer make the most efficient use of the expensive woodblock?
3. How does the printer ensure that the different portions of the image line up?
4. How many wood blocks were used to print this particular image?

After the Video

1. What surprised you about the Japanese woodblock printing process?
2. What kinds of styles might we expect a technique like this to bring out? How might the technique inflect the resulting form?