



Institutskolloquium FS 2020

«Celebrating Fifty Years of East Asian Art History at the University of Zurich»

«A Critical Review of What They Call Ukiyoe»

Em. Prof. Dr. Matthi Forrer

Wednesday, 08 April 2020, 18:15–19:45

UZH, Rämistrasse 59, 8001 Zürich

Lecture Hall RAA-G-15



No doubt, there were beautiful women (*bijin*) and actors (*yakusha*) of the kabuki theatre in Edo-period Japan, but no *bijinga*, nor were there *yakushae*. Prints portraying courtesans or actors were called *sugatae*, that is 'pictures of figures' at the time. Terms such as *bijinga* and *yakushae* are Meiji constructs. In much the same way, there was something like a floating world, the *ukiyo*, but no *ukiyo*. Early print designers called themselves 'Japanese painter,' Yamato *eshi*, or Nihon *gakō*, most likely to explicitly dissociate themselves from the Chinese inspired Kanō-tradition.

Even more serious is the circumstance that most studies of Japanese prints totally ignore figures of production and the sizes of edition – how large is the market, these prints were a totally commercial product. Taking together all single prints designed in the period prior to full colour printing, we are probably not even looking at something like the total oeuvre of Utagawa Hiroshige. Looking just at prints of actors, there is a big difference between those designed in the 1730s and 1740s by the Torii, the Okumura, and Ishikawa-traditions, to a total of some 25 to 40 designs per year, whereas some individual members of the Katsukawa-tradition would easily have an annual production amounting to 25 to 40 designs in the 1770s and 1780s. And at the time, nobody could foresee that someone like Toyokuni would, in the 1810s, design close to 200 actor prints each year. Indeed, they catered to very different audiences. And that bowl of noodles that would buy you a print ... well, maybe the Toyokuni, but not a Katsukawa Shunshō or even a Torii Kiyomitsu.

The sessions are free and open to the public. The program is supported by the Swiss-Japanese Society (SJG), JT International AG (JTI), and the Swiss-Japanese Chamber of Commerce (SJCC).