Virtual Tour: Kobayashi Kiyochika
Prints of the Sino-Japanese War
Introduction to Kobayashi Kiyochika

In this virtual tour, Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center docent Bella Dalton-Fenkl, Class of 2020, will introduce a few works from this collection by Meiji-era artist Kobayashi Kiyochika, whose fame is only increasing with time.

By the Meiji era, Japanese printmakers were having to compete with photography and were incorporating Western-styled artistic techniques in their prints. There was also movement toward a far higher degree of detail and a much wider array of colors. The style of woodblock prints often sold at this time was called *nishiki-e* (brocade pictures). Kobayashi Kiyochika is known for his chiaroscuro-like effects: his skill in conveying light and shadow in his printed landscapes. While Kiyochika worked in many modes and genres, this tour focuses on what makes the propaganda prints he produced during the First Sino-Japanese War so powerful and effective.

Journalistic photography existed when Kiyochika was creating his 1894-1895 woodblock prints, but much of the news was still delivered to wide audiences through woodblock prints in newspapers that were produced nearly concurrently with major events. It follows, then, that Kiyochika's business experienced its greatest boom in the period during the Sino-Japanese War. While Kiyochika's own politics regarding the war are unknown, he was incredibly productive while creating his commissioned propaganda.
Desperate Battle of Captain Asakawa at Tuchengzi (2008.19.22), 1895, is a mounted triptych of woodblock prints, as are all the works by Kiyochika in the collection. In Desperate Battle... Chinese soldiers sprawl across the battlefield while the Japanese forces reign supreme on a higher level of the picture plane. The spears of the Japanese cavalry greatly exceed the length of the simpering Chinese soldiers’ swords. These soldiers are depicted with round, wrinkled, twisted, baby-like faces, and are dressed in bright primary colors: the red especially is a garish, fiery one, and stands out against the relatively grey, hazy background.
These artistic decisions lead to the Chinese army looking out-of-place, awkward, doll-like, and old-fashioned in their choice of outfit, as if they were both remnants of a bygone era and ineffectual toys.

Kiyochika was commissioned to create these prints and had to have them ready for publication in time for the public to learn of the battles as the war raged on. Economy of stereotype would also have been a time-saving measure. In contrast, the Japanese soldiers, including the titular Captain Asakawa, are dressed in black, western-style coats, and blend into the swirling mountain fog. All of the Japanese figures appear practically identical from an anatomical standpoint, with the central figure of the Captain only identifiable due to his characteristic mustache, but this is not due to Kiyochika having a limited amount of skill. He had created detailed portraits earlier in his career. Instead, this was likely a conscious choice made to bestow idealized features to the men of the Japanese army in order to elevate them.
In a similar vein, their stiff poses (see their arms held tight to their sides) are not due to any artistic limitation; they recall the acting in Kabuki performances and are another heroic warrior trope. The medics and officers depicted in *Desperate Naval Battle in the Shallow Waters at the Mouth of the Port Arthur* (2008.19.20), 1895, also demonstrate these theatrical, rigid poses, in spite of the chaos surrounding them. Consider how Kiyochika imbues even the injured Japanese soldiers with dignity. How do their poses compare to those of the Chinese foot soldiers in the previous print? Why do you think Kiyochika employs a grey, hazy background in both prints? Does the composition resemble a stage?
Kiyochika is well known for his powerful atmospheric effects. In *Attack at the Site of the Hundred Foot Cliff* (2008.19.18), he depicts the opposing Chinese army as a distant series of silhouettes of bodies and weaponry. The scene illustrated in this print is most likely to be one prong of the surprise attack on the Chinese by Japanese ground forces at Weihaiwei. The swirling snow (and ash?) surrounds the advancing Japanese soldiers, connecting them with nature’s power, whereas the magenta glow and fire emanating from the Chinese stronghold looks unnatural in hue, as the Chinese soldiers are engulfed in sulfurous fog.
The shadowy fortification spits out waves of flame tinged with a bright magenta aura, which likely represents spilled blood, its source round and red like the rising sun symbol of Japan. Snowflakes in this print are depicted with raised white ink that lends them dimension, while either more snowflakes (in shadow) or ash accompanies them as they fall throughout the print.

*How else does Kiyochika demonstrate the soldiers, on both sides of the conflict, struggling against the weather and environment of the battlefield, or using it to their advantage?*
In *Picture of the Fierce Battle at Asan, attacking across the An-Söng River* (2008.19.16), 1894, depicting a battle against the Chinese army in Korea, Kiyochika uses magenta-glowing explosions and embers to highlight the river. The Japanese military was unfamiliar with this Korean terrain, making the charge into battle perilous. *How else does Kiyochika accentuate the drama and danger of this scene?*
Conclusion

Kiyochika’s Sino-Japanese War woodblock prints’ bright colors, atmospheric effects, stageplay-like compositions, racial stereotypes, bold lines, and stock poses are techniques and elements that are present in more contemporary works of propaganda. It is important to look back on prints like those of Kiyochika from the First Sino-Japanese War because propaganda is created with a similar style, shaping new impressionable audiences, even today. Given current events and the polarized politics of many countries, it is especially pertinent to look back on the nationalistic propagandistic artwork of the past in order to better understand it and avoid its bigotry, dehumanizing nature, and influence.

Can you recognize some of the techniques Kobayashi Kiyochika utilized in his artwork in “clickbait,” misleading news, and propaganda today? What about in contemporary illustrations done in ink, or in non-wartime woodblock prints?

Special thanks to curator Patricia Phagan for helping me access these works in the Art Center’s Print Room back in 2018!
Reference Information

Kobayasi Kiyochika (Japanese, 1847-1915)
Published by: Takekawa Seikichi
*Attack at the Site of the Hundred Foot Cliff*, 1895
Color woodblock print: oban tate-e triptych
Gift of Frances Beatty Adler, class of 1970, and Allen Adler
2008.19.18

Kobayasi Kiyochika (Japanese, 1847-1915)
Published by: Matsuki Heikichi
*Picture of the Fierce Battle at Asan, attacking across the An-Söŋ River*, 1894
Color woodblock print: oban tate-e triptych
Gift of Frances Beatty Adler, class of 1970, and Allen Adler
2008.19.16

Kobayasi Kiyochika (Japanese, 1847-1915)
Published by: Matsuki Heikichi
*Desperate Battle of Captain Asakawa at Tuchengzi*, 1895
Color woodblock print: oban tate-e triptych
Gift of Frances Beatty Adler, class of 1970, and Allen Adler
2008.19.22

Kobayasi Kiyochika (Japanese, 1847-1915)
Published by: Matsunaga Sakujio
*Desperate Naval Battle in the Shallow Waters at the Mouth of the Port Arthur*, 1895
Color woodblock print: oban tate-e triptych
Gift of Frances Beatty Adler, class of 1970, and Allen Adler
2008.19.20