

Hokusai's *The Mansion of the Plates* (Sara yashiki)

Kelsey Keith

ARTH 118: History of Asian Art

22 November 2022

Highly acclaimed for his work as an artist, Katsushika Hokusai, known simply as 'Hokusai,' established himself as a master painter through a variety of subjects, styles, and mediums. However, he is most known for his *Ukiyo-e* style woodblock prints. One of these prints, known as *The Mansion of the Plates (Sara yashiki)*, comes from his series One Hundred Ghost Tales (*Hyaku monogatari*). Measuring at 23.7 x 17.6 cm and dating around 1831, this woodblock print was painted with ink and color on paper. The print beautifully depicts the fateful tragedy of the maid-servant Okiku. Hailing from a popular Japanese ghost story, the narrative has been illustrated numerous times by various artists. By observing Hokusai's print, and works in relation to the style and narrative it presents, one can learn and appreciate the supernatural folklore and visual elements that are presented within it.

Looking at the woodblock print, *The Mansion of the Plates (Sara yashiki)*, one is immediately drawn to the undulating motion of the central figures form. Rising from a wooden well, the figure begins as a set of decorative blue china plates covered lightly in strands of dark hair. With decorative triangular patterns confined to circles of white and varying shades of blue, these plates flow upwards and to the left. Ending at a total of seven plates, they then curve to the right and transition into a full mass of hair. This hair connects to the pale, solemn profile of a feminine figure that centers itself in the upper middle half of the print. The fluid, yet defined nature of the hair presents the use of leading lines which allows the viewer to follow the spirit as it rises from the well. The subject's face is notably large in scale, and presents a lack of higher-detail. With the use of flat coloring and no distinct modeling other than the slightly darker tone found within her ear, she is presented a life-less and haunting figure. Her eye droops downward, with the slightest tinge of pale red enhancing her tired, discontent expression. Her features are made up of simple lines that form her nostril, lip, and eyelid. She lacks any

eyebrows, despite her distinctly high brow-bone. From her mouth, a wisp of smoke curves outward, slightly filling the negative space in front of her. This acts as a balance for the composition, unifying its right side in relation to the plates that occupy the left portion of the scene. The smoke is colored with the same, dull beige found in the figure's face. It provides no texture, emphasizing the flat and lifeless nature of the spirit. The figure is placed against a deep, navy blue background that ombre's to a near black as it reaches the lower half of the print. Looking away from the spirit, at the bottom of the print stands the well from which she emerges. The well is a flat brown color, aside from the reddish hue found on its right side that implies shadow. It is lightly surrounded by leaves of ivy that vary in hues of light and dark green. The veins of the leaves are highly detailed. At the top of the print in the right hand corner, the navy blue background is interrupted by a small, enclosed block of black script in a beige box.

Part of a series, this work shows Hokusai's intention of creating an artificial, unnatural scene. In respect to style, this work can be compared to other known works in the series such as *Oiwa (Oiwa-san)*. Also a woodblock print, Hokusai utilized the same techniques found in *The Mansion of the Plates* to render the main figures face, form, and hair. It is clear Hokusai placed great emphasis on the lines of his woodblock prints, with little else used to provide any sense of form or texture. He maintains the simple flatness of his color palette within this work as he did in *The Mansion of the Plates*. This is seen through his use of the same, flat beige color for Oiwa's large face, which is rendered to look as if it is part of a paper lantern. However, more modeling is found within Hokusai's *Oiwa (Oiwa-san)*, as he utilized a slightly darker shade of orange against the beige of the lantern to give it depth. The figure's hair is dark yet wiry, unlike the flowing hair seen in *The Mansion of the Plates*, yet the technique used to create the thin strands of hair is the same. They also share the same red tinge in their eyes, illuminating their haunted nature.

Compositionally these works are very similar, they are both placed against a dark navy blue background, and both figures have disproportionately large heads that land in the near center of their respective works. These works not only are compositionally similar, they also both portray unnatural scenes that hail from popular Japanese ghost stories during the Edo period.

Contextually, *The Mansion of the Plates* serves to represent Japanese folklore surrounding tales of ghosts. In the Edo period, ghost stories were known as “Kaidan,” and were exceptionally popular.¹ People of every class would get together for a *hyakumonogatari kaidankai*, a gathering where they told one hundred stories to “induce a supernatural phenomenon.”² Kaidan were both spoken and made in print, as found in *The Mansion of the Plates*.³ These stories served as a form of entertainment for those living in Edo, Japan. Hokusai’s prints in particular were revered as he was a well established artist among Edo’s cultural elite. After having been commissioned by Edo’s foremost publisher Tsutaya Jūsaburō, Hokusai’s work was introduced to a number of *Ukiyo-e* artists and became known.⁴ The *Ukiyo-e* style arose in the Edo period in response to the “desires and fantasies” of the new merchant class.⁵ Ghostly images were made especially popular because the belief in hauntings and possessions was still extremely evident.⁶ Hokusai was a high demand artist working to produce quality prints in the *Ukiyo-e* style during this period; thus his series One Hundred Ghost Tales would have visually served those who attended *hyakumonogatari kaidankai* and believed in the supernatural.

¹Noriko T. Reider, "The Appeal of Kaidan Tales of the Strange," *Asian Folklore Studies* 59, no. 2 (2000): 265.

² Noriko T. Reider, "The Appeal of Kaidan Tales of the Strange," 265.

³Noriko T. Reider, "The Appeal of Kaidan Tales of the Strange," 265.

⁴Matthi Forrer, *Hokusai : prints and drawings*, (Munich: Prestel, 1991), 13.

⁵Addiss, Stephen, Brenda Jordan, James Secor, Janet Carpenter, et al, *Japanese Ghosts & Demons Art of the Supernatural*, (New York: George Braziller in association with Spencer Museum of art, 1985), 49.

⁶Addiss, Stephen, et al, *Japanese Ghosts & Demons*, 49.

Eventually, Kaidan grew to have stylistic canons found throughout a variety of works, which are seen in Hokusai's *Mansion of the Plates*. Depictions of *Yūrei*, or ghosts, were given a relatively standard stylistic formula.⁷ During the Edo period, a female *Yūrei* was often illustrated with long, straight dark hair, beckoning hands, and pale skin.⁸ She often was conceived to be wearing pale clothing over her fragile, thin figure- while her head and upper body were strongly defined.⁹ Despite having no specific 'body' so to speak, *Mansion of the Plates*, as well as *Oiwa (Oiwa-san)* still distinctly fall within many of those particular attributes. With highly defined and enlarged heads, long, thin dark hair, and pale faces, these works clearly demonstrate the fundamentals of *Yūrei* representation.

The particular narrative displayed in Hokusai's *The Mansion of the Plates (Sara yashiki)* is the tale of maid-servant Okiku. Serving under the samurai Aoyama Tessan, Okiku was charged with the care of his ten precious ceramic plates, of which he received from Dutch visitors.¹⁰ However, wanting her to be his mistress, Aoyama hid one of the plates and ordered Okiku to present them each to him.¹¹ She of course was unable to do so, and he offered to overlook her 'carelessness' if she accepted to be his mistress.¹² She refused him, and he murdered her, throwing her body into a well.¹³ This tale actively functions as a Kaidan, and would have been used to incite fear and excitement for all in attendance at a *hyakumonogatari kaidankai*. Having Okiku's fate shown in Hokusai's print creates a visual to pair with the tale. Another work that presents a rendition of the same tale and figure is Tsukioka Yoshitoshi's *The Ghost of Okiku at*

⁷ Brenda Jordan, "Tales of Female Ghosts," In *Japanese Ghosts & Demons Art of the Supernatural*, ed., Stephen Addiss, (New York: George Braziller in association with Spencer Museum of art, University of Kansas, 1985), 25.

⁸ Jordan, "Tales of Female Ghosts," 25.

⁹ Jordan, "Tales of Female Ghosts," 25.

¹⁰ Jordan, "Tales of Female Ghosts," 27.

¹¹ Jordan, "Tales of Female Ghosts," 27.

¹² Jordan, "Tales of Female Ghosts," 27.

¹³ Jordan, "Tales of Female Ghosts," 27.

Sarayashiki, from the series *New Forms of Thirty-six Ghosts*. This work presents the spirit of Okiku weeping in front of the well. Yoshitoshi presents Okiku as more of a sympathetic spirit than Hokusai, showing her wiping her tears with her sleeve, and giving her a recognizable beauty with natural proportions. She is clearly a *Yūrei*, however, as her clothes and body appear translucent and one can see the well and sticks directly behind her. This particular work does not show the plates as Hokusai's does, but does provide a sympathetic visual for the tale of Okiku that arguably creates more emotional depth for her character than Hokusai's. Both ultimately provide the people of Edo, Japan with images of well known stories to aid their imaginations.

In essence, Hokusai's *The Mansion of the Plates (Sara yashiki)* demonstrates his masterful skill in the way of woodblock print-making. Visually enticing through his use of line, color, subject matter, and composition, this work displays Okiku's tragic fate beautifully in respect to artist skill. Overall, by analyzing Hokusai's print, and works in relation to it, we may value the supernatural folklore and visual elements that emerge through them.

Bibliography

Addiss, Stephen, Brenda Jordan, James Secor, Janet Carpenter, Midori Deguchi, Pat Fister, Jamie Lillywhite, et al. *Japanese Ghosts & Demons Art of the Supernatural*. New York: George Braziller in association with Spencer Museum of art, University of Kansas, 1985.

Forrer, Matthi. *Hokusai : prints and drawings*. Munich: Prestel, 1991.

Reider, Noriko T. "The Appeal of Kaidan Tales of the Strange." *Asian Folklore Studies* 59, no. 2 (2000): 265. *Gale Literature Resource Center* (accessed November 16, 2022).

https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A77336574/LitRC?u=viva_mwc&sid=bookmark-LitRC&xid=0273a27a.



Katsushika Hokusai, "The Mansion of the Plates (Sara yashiki), from the series One Hundred Ghost Stories (Hyaku monogatari)." 1881-82. Woodblock print; ink and color on paper. Edo period, Japan. With detail images.



Katsushika Hokusai, “Oiwa (Oiwa-san), from the series “One Hundred Ghost Tales (Hyaku monogatari).”” 1881-82. Woodblock print; ink and color on paper. Edo period, Japan.



Tsukioka Yoshitoshi, “The Ghost of Okiku at Sarayashiki, from the series New Forms of Thirty-six Ghosts.” 1890. Woodblock print; ink and color on paper. Meiji era, Japan.