Exploring the Implications of Authenticity in a Museum Setting: Study of a Utamaro print at the USU Museum of Anthropology

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Introduction

In 2016 the USU Museum of Anthropology received a Japanese block print as part of a transfer from the Nora Eccles Harrison Museum of Art. The prints were donated to NEHMA in the 1980s by a woman whose husband bought them in Japan during WWII. The artist was believed to be Kitagawa Utamaro, a printmaker active during the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Research was needed to determine the authenticity of the print. If the prints were originals, a chain of ownership needed to be established connecting the buyer to Utamaro himself.

Background

Kitagawa Utamaro (1753-1806) was arguably the most prominent print artist in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. He was part of the ukiyo-e ("pictures of the floating world") genre which often depicted scenes from the pleasure districts. Utamaro's work focused on courtesans and he developed a signature female figure which had an elongated head, small hands, and an elaborate hair style. Utamaro's more erotic prints were often bound into small books to be enjoyed privately. His larger prints tended to be less erotic, but still contained subtle sexual themes. This print is called "Mayu-Hiki" (A Beauty Painting Her Eyebrows) and is probably the right sheet of a triptych (a three paneled series.)

Methods

Research was conducted using a database of artwork from museums and auction houses. Eventually, three "Mayu-Hiki" prints were found, two in auction houses and one at the Guimet in France. These prints were compared with the USU print to determine authenticity. Instructors from the USU Department of Language were consulted to translate the text on one of the prints.

The original print features the seal of publisher Ise-Ise-Mago (center) and the kiwame or "approved" censor's seal (right.) The USU print has an unidentified red seal (left) that might indicate a different publisher.

Future Research

Research about the red seal on the USU print could provide the name of a publisher. That information might be contained in the text on the left margin of the print, but efforts need to be made to translate the characters.

References

10. Eccles Harrison Museum of Art. The prints were donated to NEHMA in the 1980s by a woman whose husband bought them in Japan during WWII. The artist was believed to be Kitagawa Utamaro, a printmaker active during the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Research was needed to determine the authenticity of the print. If the prints were originals, a chain of ownership needed to be established connecting the buyer to Utamaro himself.

Print Classification

Original-Prints made during the artist’s lifetime using blocks designed by the artist
Restrike-Prints made using the original blocks after the artist died
Reproduction-Prints made from recut blocks based on the artist’s original design.
Forgery-Prints that are intended to deceive buyers into thinking that they are original

Conclusion

The "Mayu-Hiki" print at the USU Museum of Anthropology is a reproduction print. If the print was a forgery, the printer would have included the censor’s and printer’s seals as part of the design. Reproduction prints still have value in a museum setting. According to Sandis, artworks exist primarily for aesthetics and museums exist primarily for education. A reproduction print like "Mayu-Hiki" keeps it’s aesthetic value for patrons to enjoy, and it can still be used as the focal point for educational discussions about Utamaro and Japanese block printing.