



大津絵 Ōtsu-e

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Introduction

Ōtsu-e, created as a buddhist tool for worship, then used as proof of one's religion during anti-christian movements, and finally adopted as a cultural art style that can still be seen today in Japan that mixes an array of Asian cultural figures from Japan, China, and India. This presentation will aim in looking at how art is fostered from a range of time periods along a pathway naturally created by a society over time. For example, by looking at *Ōtsu-e* we can better understand how *Ōtsu-e* became popularized unconsciously by a society and determine if this is comparable to other art forms in other time periods. In order to discuss this further, *Ōtsu-e*'s prehistory, origin, historic use, and popularization will be reviewed.

Ōtsu-e terminology

“*Ōtsu-e*” can be translated as “paintings from the town *Ōtsu*” which is shown here, but can also apply to the genre of painting depicting buddhist figures from idiographic poetry (Welch 1994) as well as works produced by nearby towns that hired artists to paint buddhist figures to dispel allegations of being christian (McArthur 1999). In the popular definition, *Ōtsu-e* is the simplistic depiction of secular and non-secular caricatures from older generations.



Ōtsu-e, in the literal sense, is simplistic and reproducible depictions of Japanese religious and folk figures. As seen here the famous image of *Oni no Nembutsu*, the praying goblin, shows a demon noted for wearing a buddhist priest robes (Welch) and can be compared to different time periods of the same subject to determine how it was used and valued in each period. The repeating theme and evolution of the art style is also seen in early works.



Buddhist Prehistory

Kōans are phrases or questions that allow a student to ponder an unanswerable question. Kōans are sometimes seen accompanying Ōtsu-e images, one famous example of this is from *Hyōtan Namazu*, a painting of a Monkey holding a gourd trying to catch a catfish. Despite this being widely popular from Ōtsu-e, the origins of this riddle come from the 15th century, by Josetsu a prominent artist during the Muromachi Period (Welch). The story was originally created as a philosophical satire between Muromachi Era professional artists. Many concepts then transferred to Ōtsu-e.



Ōtsu-e art

Ōtsu-e origins are traced back to religious buddhist icons like *Amida Buddha* and *Daikoku* (Asahi 1957, Welch) that are painted as early as early as 1602 (Asahi, McArthur). Early Ōtsu-e were used to educate buddhist doctrine (McArthur). Over time the strict demand of buddhist figures ended, and more secular figures began appearing in an entertaining style that aimed to highlight contemporary *Edo* society's culture (Welch). Such paintings were suggested to have Talismanic powers if hung in someone's home (McArthur).



At the beginning of the Edo Period, 1600-1700's, Japan was dealing with the wide spread of Christianity in their country. During the ban on christianity Japanese citizens were encouraged to inform the government of any christian suspicions. Because of this there were lots of investigations questioning a individual's faith and required physical evidence either by walking on pictures of christian saints or having buddhist paintings in one's home (McArthur, Welch). Soon everyone one had one in their home to prove their piety towards buddhist doctrine and to denounce christianity, and after a while this agenda succeeded in pushing out christianity.



After the start of the Edo Period, around the 1700's, *Ōtsu-e* was no longer used to prove one's ideology, as was the case during the anti-christian society (Welch), and began adopting contemporary figures that were seen along the *Tōkaidō Road*. Caricatures like the spear bearer, seen holding a pike with a large black pom pom attached at the top were depicted to show the "strength and honor" and the more satirical impression of "boorish arrogance" (Welch, McArthur). Even other members of the daimyo possessions were painted like the Falconer who was idolized for their slender features and prestigious image in processions (Welch).



Ōtsu-e's popularization

Ōtsu-e's popularization can be attributed to a variety of factors, religious influence, geographical location, cheap production cost, and fluidity of subject matter. In my opinion a large reason why Ōtsu-e was so successive was because of the acceptance of new styles and subjects, each new generation of Ōtsu-e builds upon existing frameworks and evolves with new mediums, as seen in poetry, plays, and ukiyo-e (Welch). Ōtsu-e pulls in figures from real life, shinto folklore, chinese folklore, and hindu deities bringing a wide variety of characters to be added to the Ōtsu-e genre.

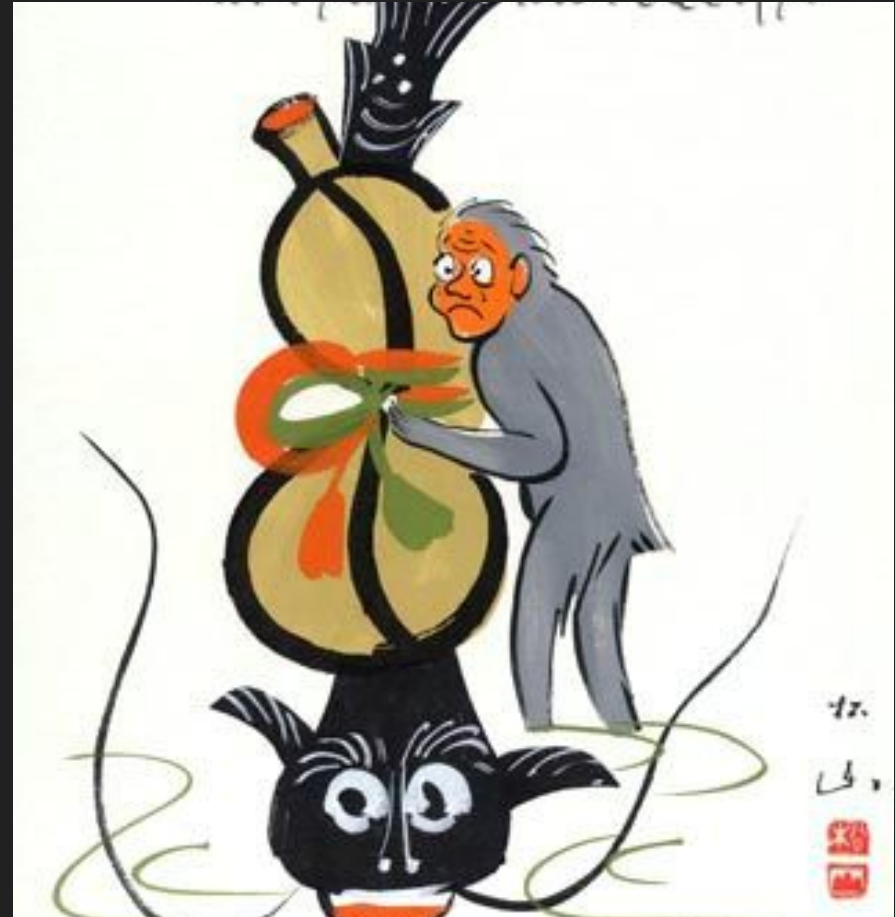


Ōtsu-e was also able to gain popularity during the Edo period due to the *Tōkaidō Road* culture and the concurrent Ukiyo-e Culture (McArthur). The constant influx of travellers, the collectability of Ōtsu-e characters, and the talismanic powers associated with each painting led to the popularization of Ōtsu-e.



Conclusion

From Ōtsu-e's path of becoming a popular art form we can better analyze how art in different time periods not only become mainstream, but also how art can narrate and reflect the society around it. In one perspective we can see how there was an agenda to remove christianity, promote buddhism, and assimilate other cultures into one identity as well as be able to see which stages had the most influence on its adoption by society. Each character from Ōtsu-e has there own cultural roots that be elaborated on to better consolidate this information.



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