

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

11 WEST 53RD STREET, NEW YORK

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JAPANESE THEATRE SATIRIZED BY GREAT EIGHTEENTH CENTURY ARTIST

On Wednesday, April 3, the Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, will open to the public a comprehensive exhibition of the strange and powerful portrait prints in which Sharaku, one of the most mysterious figures in the history of art, depicted the heroes and villains of the popular Japanese theatre of the closing years of the eighteenth century. Only 136 examples of this artist's work are known to exist. Of this number 108 are shown in the exhibition, the remaining 28 represented by photographs. Besides these there are eight drawings and two fans, which make the record of his known work complete.

The exhibition has been assembled by Louis V. Ledoux, who is co-author with Harold G. Henderson of the book The Surviving Works of Sharaku, which will serve as a catalog of the exhibition. The exhibition has been previously shown this season at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and at the Art Institute of Chicago. Lenore Browning, Assistant in the Museum's Department of Painting and Sculpture, will install the exhibition. It will be on view until May 1.

What little is known of the artist who signed himself "Sharaku" (One-Who-Likes-To-Draw) may be summarized briefly from the introduction to the amply illustrated catalog which reproduces all of the artist's works known to survive. His name in private life was Saito Jurobei; by profession he was a dancer in the semi-religious and mystical No dramas which were played only in the dimly lit palaces of the nobles and before hushed audiences of scholars. During ten months of 1794, he produced his satirical portraits of the enormously popular actors in the theatre of the common people, showing them in actual stage scenes. At the end of these ten months his creative activity ceased as abruptly as it had begun. The rest is silence. There is no prentice work, no decline. No one knows when he was born or when he died. The very meagre contemporary records say only that his work, though powerful, was exaggerated and failed

to please the public. After this Sharaku remained practically unknown in Japan.

More than a hundred years later he was called forcibly to the attention of his countrymen through the discovery of his importance by the Occident, and the enthusiasm of French collectors which culminated in an exhibition at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in 1911. Within the past forty years great collections of Sharaku's prints have been formed in Europe, America and Japan, and much has been written regarding the historical and aesthetic problems suggested by his work.

It remained, however, for the organizers of the present exhibition, the Society for Japanese Studies of New York, and the compilers of its catalog, Messrs. Louis V. Ledoux and Harold G. Henderson, to make researches into the theatrical archives of the period which enabled them to give outlines of the plots of the plays themselves and lists of dramatis personae, so that the type of character being represented by each actor and through him by Sharaku might be understood. Many identifications not known before have now been listed and much new information has been obtained.

During the exhibition, excerpts from the catalog will be displayed on the walls with the prints so that the types of the characters portrayed and the plots of the plays in which the actors were appearing may be quickly understood. There was the ever-popular vendetta story; the drama of loyalty; the historical play; the biographical play of loosely connected episodes; and the play of the loyal son who goes through many difficulties to avenge the death of his father. The principal characters in each of the plays are drawn by Sharaku in the prescribed costumes and with the identifying hair arrangements of villain, hero, nurse, court lady, priest, pilgrim, hair dresser, peasant girl, soldier, spy, geisha and ghost. The exhibition will show these prints in the proper sequences to illustrate the plays represented. Even the theatre director, fat, shrewd and complacent, is shown seated in ceremonial costume and reading from a scroll--possibly an announcement of one of the very plays which Sharaku has illustrated with such graphic satire.

Mr. Ledoux, co-author of the catalog, comments on Sharaku

and the theatre of his time, as follows:

"In eighteenth-century Japan there were two kinds of theatre--the No, abstruse, mystical, stately, which was patronized only by the aristocracy, and Kabuki, the melo-dramatic, swashbuckling, romantic stage of the common people which had been developed from the puppet-plays and in which the actors simulated the motions--crossed eyes, distended hands, exaggerated postures--which had been dear to the public in performances of the dolls they loved to watch. In the No, Sharaku moved with slow grace, masked and magnificently robed, in an atmosphere roughly equivalent to that of the Good Friday scene in Parsifal; he was like one who had given his life to playing Aeschylus in Greek at Oxford.

"The people's theatre--Kabuki--that Sharaku depicted, was totally different. Masks were not worn: the plays were melodramatic, violent. Virtue was rewarded, villains were defeated to the vociferous delight of closely packed audiences. The plots were drawn, as in Greece, from universally known chronicles of bygone wars; or else they told later tales of loyalty and love and revenge. Some of the great love stories, the great vendetta stories, were produced again and again with many variations. Loyalty was the primary motive of the dramatic conflict in most of these plays, whether the struggle of a woman torn between devotion to the daughter of her feudal lord and devotion to her own child and husband, or the recurrent story of young men who gave their lives to avenge their father and to clear his memory.

"All the passions of the bourgeoisie were played on with consummate histrionic skill by actors who were idolized but who, as Sharaku coming from the austerity of the No saw them, gave a view of life in which the animal characteristics, the stupidity, the conceit, the vulgarity, the little-nesses of humanity seemed the fundamental characteristics of the players themselves and of the roles they enacted. One may look at Sharaku's portraits and see only his mastery of composition and line, his human insight, or one may gain from them a new vision of an important and highly developed phase of theatrical history that is almost unknown to the theatre-going public of the Occident."

The lenders to the exhibition are: The Art Institute of Chicago; Frederick S. Colburn, Evanston, Illinois; Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge, Massachusetts; Gilbert E. Fuller, Boston, Massachusetts; Edwin Edward Grabhorn, San Francisco, California; Louis V. Ledoux, New York; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Massachusetts; Portland Art Museum, Portland, Oregon; Carl Schaubstadter, New York.

NOTE: - "Kagamijishi," a film of a performance in the popular Kabuki theatre of Japan, from which Sharaku drew his subject matter, will be shown in the Museum auditorium at three o'clock daily except Sundays for the duration of the exhibition of Sharaku prints.