

'The survival of Japanese flat art and the development of the 'Superflat' style through the art of Takashi Murikami and Yoshitomo Nara'

Survival can be explored and interpreted from many different perspectives. Although, for the purpose of this essay I am going to introduce it from the perspective of an ancient Japanese style of painting.

One of the most iconic and recognisable styles of art derived from Japan, the Edo period, was the starting point for Japanese flat art and painting. Some of the most traditional practices in Japan were derived from the Edo period, including things like scrolls, ceramics, textiles and screen paintings. Without the Edo period, western art culture may not have developed into what we see today, as the first and largest exhibition for the entirety of Edo period artwork was first held in the US. This exposed the western world to the traditional style of flat painting and woodblock printing in Japan. Without the Edo period, 'Superflat' artists would not exist.

“Edo” refers both to the city of Edo—now called Tokyo—and to a time period, from 1615 to 1868, during which fifteen generations of Tokugawa *shogun*, or feudal overlords, ruled Japan from this urban capital.’ (*Edo Art in Japan, n.d.*)

The art movement Ukiyo-e is used to describe the original style of Japanese flat paintings during the development of the Edo period to the current styles and flat illustrations in Japan. Ukiyo-e works were usually created with woodblock print in which the artist would draw an image onto a piece of thin washi paper, glue it to a wood block and skilfully carve the image on to the block of wood from the paper. This created a very distinguished flat style of traditional life in Japan, as well as images from Japanese mythology, which were very specific and true to the culture at the time.

This style flourished during the 17th and 19th centuries with the styles most well-known artist and print maker, Katsushika Hokusai, commonly referred to as Hokusai, iconic for his woodblock print series 'Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji' including the staple print of 'The Great Wave off Kanagawa' which now stands as an instant identifier for this Japanese flat art movement.

'The Great Wave', originally named Under the Wave off Kanagawa, currently remains as one of the most reproduced prints/pieces of the last two centuries. It is very prevalent in the art world, with references appearing in popular fashion, street art, contemporary painting and installations. The famous woodblock print makes Japan's biggest mountain, mount fuji, appear as a small triangular mound within the frame of the cresting wave. There have been many reproductions of The Grand Wave throughout the art world, where it has been appropriated, warped and referenced and used in different ways throughout western and Japanese culture.



Hokusai 'The Great Wave off Kanagawa' - 1829-1833



Kozyndan 'Uprisings' - 2003

LA based artist duo, husband and wife, Kozue and Dan Kitchens go by the pseudonym; Kozyndan turned turn Hokusai's originally naturalist piece into a pop-surrealist digital illustration. The idea came to Dan in a dream, and inspired a project titled 'seasons of the bunny', which is a series of images that take elements of traditional Japanese ukiyo-e art and appropriated the images with masses of illustrated rabbits. Their take on the great wave, titled 'uprisings' (created and named after a particular issue of Giant Robot magazine) features a multitude of rabbits caught in the wave, making up the white of the foam in the water. They state that the original intention was just to make a pretty image that encompassed the focus of Giant Robot Magazine, which was dedicated to Asian-American pop culture and art. This is a modern, more graphical take on the classic traditional painting Hosukai created.

Incredibly famous artist, Takashi Murakami, created the 'Superflat' art movement when he coined the term in an exhibition, he organised labelled 'Superflat' in Tokyo during 2001. The exhibition focused on how Tokyo retracing the origins of Japanese contemporary art through the history of Japanese traditional art. The word 'Superflat' refers to the two-dimensional flatness found in original Japanese pictorial art, as the ukiyo-e art movement was very two dimensional and 'flat' with little perspective. A lot of Superflat artists have been inspired by Japanese manga and anime art, which combine the 2D aspect of traditional Japanese art with pop culture and popular tropes.

Another famous Japanese artist, Yoshitomo Nara, became involved in an avant-garde community of Japanese artists, in around 2001, known as 'Superflat', alongside Takashi Murakami. In 2001 solo exhibition held in Japan, 'I DONT MIND, IF YOU FORGET ME', marked a style and theme that influenced Nara's work forever. Combining elements of his own past, and the past of traditional Japanese culture, he created a series of works surrounding flat paintings of children, with facial features derived from the traditional Japanese Okame and Otafuku theatrical masks. His works also took inspiration from Japanese anime and manga art as it contained bold linework and simplified body poses.



Hokusai 'Fine Wind, Clear Morning' - From Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji series -1830 to 1832.



Yoshitomo Nara 'In the Floating World' - 1998 - 1999

Pictured above is a piece from Yoshitomo Nara's 'in the floating world' set of 16 reworked traditional Japanese Ukiyo-e art pieces printed over with xerographic woodcuts on paper. This one is a rendition/overprint of Hokusai's piece 'fine wind, clear morning', a traditional Japanese woodblock print of mount Fuji in early autumn where the sunrise casts a red gradient on to the mountain as snow lingers at the top of the mountain. This series of works present altered, appropriated reproductions of well-known Japanese pieces from the Ukiyo-e period. In the piece, there is a little girl skiing down the famous mount fuji, more graphic than the original in an almost cartoonish take, with a snowman pictured to the left as the mountain is covered in a blanket of snow. The shape of the original piece remains visible, keeping the piece recognisable as the traditional Hokusai print. Understandably, this image may seem offensive towards traditional Japanese Ukiyo-e art, as it has been drawn over similarly to vandalism, although this piece is taking the original heritage and modernising it for today's world. This speaks for a lot of Nara's work, as he takes this traditional flat style and influence and transforms it in a way that visually fits Nara's vision for the work, modernising the piece. This piece perfectly intertwines the traditional and modern aspects of Japanese contemporary artwork, drawing the flat and the illustrative style together with influences from colourful, graphic western art.



Takashi Murakami '727' - 1996

Second image, pictured above, named '727' is a three-panel acrylic painting on canvas painted by Takashi Murikami in 1996. Instantly recognisable as it features Murikami's shapeshifting classic character, 'DOB', caught in a wave and surrounded by shades of blue, purple and yellow, making it appear like the character is suspended in the wave. There are clear nods to the Japanese Edo period, and ukiyo-e art in the stylised waves that feature in a lot of classic ukiyo-e artworks. This piece contains a mixture of texture and flat block coloured painting, and the three sections of canvas with board pay reference to Kano Eino's piece 'One Hundred Boys' painted on a 6-panel screen during the Edo art period in Japan. A stylised illustrated scene of traditional Japanese life, with instantly recognisable traditional Japanese imagery.

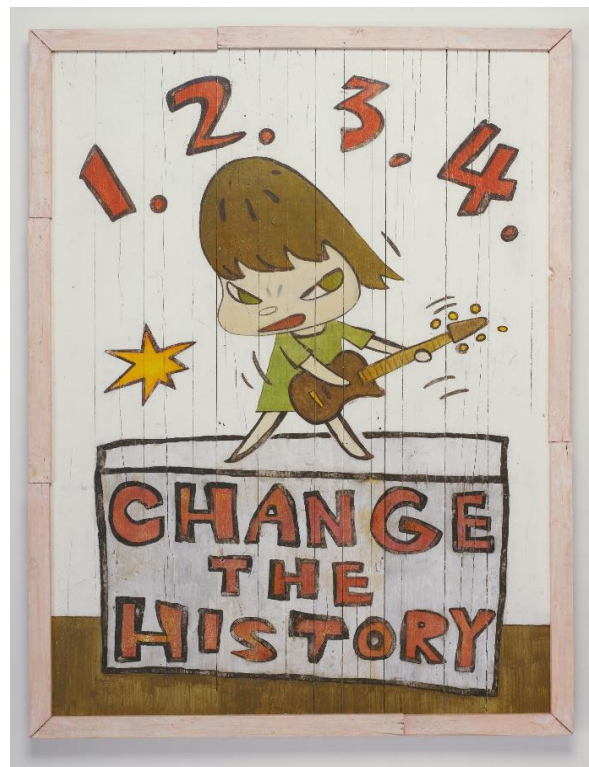


Kano Einō 'One Hundred Boys' 1631–1697

As only two examples of the artist's work have been shown, these images have been selected to portray Takashi Murikami and Yoshitomo Nara's overarching art themes and styles, showcasing what their artwork usually looks like.



Takashi Murikami 'Me and Mr. DOB' – 2009



Yoshitomo Nara '1.2.3.4. Change the History' – 2007

It is clear to see the similarity between both works, as they both feature 2D, flat, graphic characters with blocked colours. They both seem like artworks targeted towards children and youth, as they are very bright and colourful and have exaggerated features. However, Murikami's piece shows a joyous look on the characters faces, as they are surrounded by equally as happy flowers in the patterned background. The character 'Mr DOB' acts as an alter ego for Murikami and is pictured smiling alongside a self-portrait.

This contrasts to Nara's piece as it portrays a young child playing guitar, with an angered expression on their face above the words 'change the history' in capitals underneath. This is implying that the work exists to promote a 'change' in the world, unlike the happy going nature of Murikami's piece. Nara's work is very consistent in this style of bold capital writing and his works almost always include frustrated and uncomfortable looking children.

There is no denying the instant recognisability of the characters and styles that are prevalent throughout both artists work, along with the development of the 'Superflat' style blocked colours and linework which pays tribute to the traditional Ukiyo-e art and the art of the Edo period in Japan.

Without the development of traditional Japanese flat art during the Edo period (1603 – 1867), and the Ukiyo-e art movement (17th through 19th centuries) the world of contemporary Japanese art, and western simplified flat artwork, would not be what we see in the world today.

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