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Programme of Study: Illustration (BA)
Module: Research in Practice ADAD5004
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Word Count: 2,180
Three Keywords: Storytelling, Folklore, Identity.

Ukiyo-e's Influence on the Tattoo Industry: From Yazaka to Sailors.

Introduction

Within this proposal, I will be exploring three intertwined keywords: Storytelling, Folklore, and Identity within the context of the traditional art of Japanese woodblock printing, also known as Ukiyo-e. I aim to study the historical context behind each keyword and more specifically explore how these factors play into Japan and the woodblock printing artform. I plan to study Ukiyo-e art prints that fall under my chosen keywords to further deepen my understanding. Additionally, I will explore how woodblock printing has inspired the tattoo industry, both in Asia and in the Western, this understanding will aid my intended third year practice.

Storytelling

“Narrative painting, at its core, is any form of art that allows the viewer to see a story unfolding. Often, in just one image, it is possible to perceive the past, the present, and even to infer a future.” (Caira, C. 2024)

Every piece of art, no matter the form, tells a story and has a deeper meaning that could be personal to the artist. Artworks could also provoke a political, historical, or symbolic story, there truly is no limit. Humans have been communicating through art since the dawn of time, it is argued that narrative work is the oldest form of art. Egyptians during ancient times(3100 BCE-332 BCE) “used vivid visuals to convey not only tales of their pharaohs and gods but also to express religious beliefs about the afterlife”(Caira, C. 2024.)

Famous Japanese painter and Ukiyo-e printmaker Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849) most infamous and influential print *Under the Wave off Kanagawa* (1831) is instantly recognisable thanks to Hokusai’s distinctive style, this woodblock print has gone to inspire countless of artists. His other works tell stories of everyday life in Japan, including nature, landscapes and people.



Figure 1: Hokusai, K. (1830-32). *Snowy Morning at Koishikawa*.

Many of Hokusai's work combines landscape and people to tell a story, his most famous and celebrated set *Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji* (1832) consists of 46 unique woodblock prints, *Snowy Morning at Koishikawa* (1830-32) being one of them (figure 1). The snowy scene shows a group of women in traditional Edo attire gathered at a tea house, admiring the view of Fuji as the clouds uncover the famous mountain. The palette used is limited, the blues giving the narrative a calm yet cold feel which evokes the climate, and the skillful gradient of the sky hints it is already or becoming night. As a viewer, we naturally want to seek more insight on the story being told - why are the women gathered? Why is one of the women pointing out the birds? With no definite answer, this gives the viewer an opportunity to fill in the blanks and the freedom to manifest their own final narrative which is the case for many pieces of art. There is not always a precise story behind artwork which is the beauty of narrative art.



Figure 2: Hokusai, K. (1835). *Hundred Poems Explained by the Wet Nurse*.

Another print series by Hokusai, *Hundred Poems Explained by the Wet Nurse* (1835), is a retelling of a set of unfinished poems under the same name written by Abe no Nakamaro (698AD-770AD.) This print in particular is known to be an unconventional interpretation, it depicts a figure in the centre of the print overlooking the water that reflects the moon with two other men bowing at his feet. From the figure's appearance, it assumed he is of high status. Unlike Hokusai's work in his other series (figure 1), the palette is warm but still flat, red in today's standards is a symbolism of danger and anger so the viewer is inclined to believe the narrative of the print is negative. However, red during this era in Japan symbolised wealth and high power, which would strengthen the idea of the main figure being of high status.

Folklore

“The role of mythology and folklore in art is multifaceted, serving as both a source of inspiration and a means of communication. Artists often utilise these narratives to explore complex themes such as identity, morality, and the human condition. By referencing mythological figures or folkloric tales, artists can tap into a shared cultural lexicon that resonates with viewers on a profound level.” (Art Guru, 2025.)

Folklore is such a broad umbrella term that includes mythology, legends, fables and lots more. The term was first instigated by British writer William John Thoms (1803-85) in 1846, the word originating from Old English, the term broken down simply means ‘knowledge that belongs to the people.’ Similar to storytelling, folklore is passed down from generations and acts as a source of entertainment, but also to act as warnings and moral lessons. Art has been an age-old way to creatively

explore folklore that surpasses boundaries, it evokes curiosity and reflects beliefs within a wide range of media - paintings, illustrations, ceramics, sculptures, and more. Every country and culture has their own unique legends and mythology with their own unique folklore artwork, and Japan is a country rich with distinctive folklore with many having roots in Shintoism and Buddhism; primary religions in Japan.

Many Ukiyo-e works portray a wide variety of Japanese folklore, telling tales of infamous Japanese traditions, legends, and monsters. Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1798-1861) is amongst the famous Japanese woodblock printers during the Edo period (1603–1868), at the start of his career his work primarily explored warriors from tales with extremely dynamic poses and very expressive faces, these prints were bold and striking. Kuniyoshi gained success from his samurai prints which allowed him to explore other avenues within Ukiyo-e, including nature, people, specifically women, and ghouls from folklore.

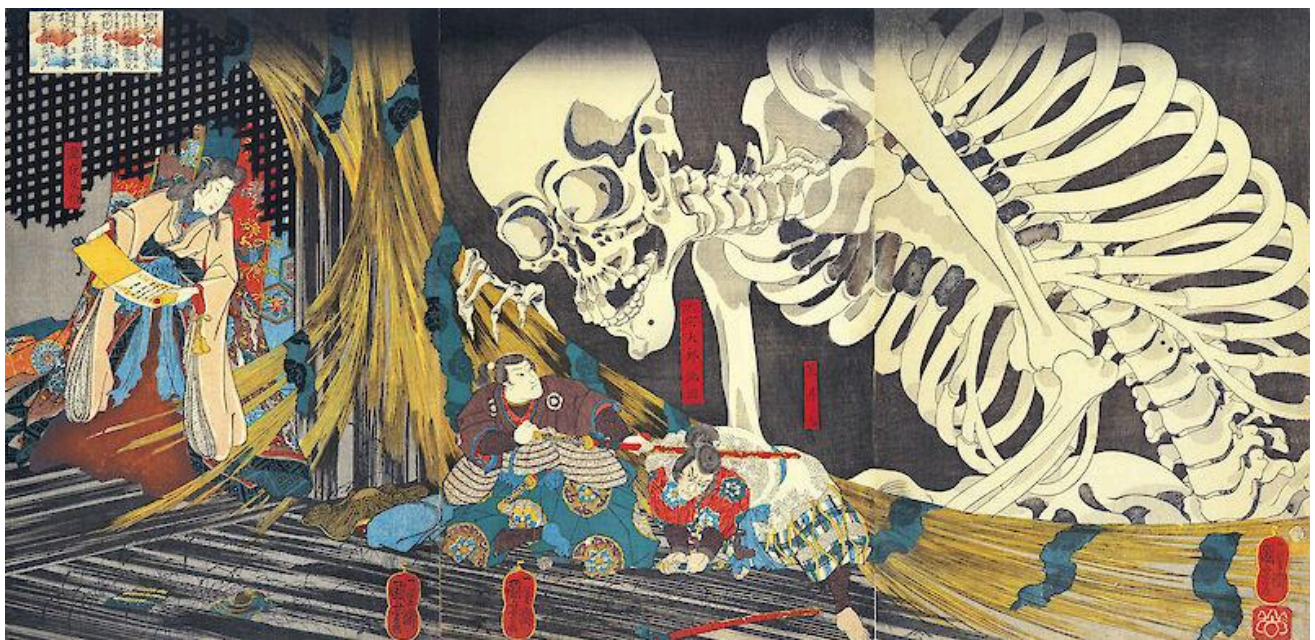


Fig 3: Kuniyoshi, U. (1843-47). *Takiyasha the Witch and the Skeleton Spectre*.

In one of his most famous works of art, Kuniyoshi retells the legend of Princess Takiyasha. The princess turned to witchcraft after the death of her father during a revolt, she studied dark arts with plans to act revenge on her father's murder. The woodblock print (figure 3) depicts the moment Takiyasha summons a spectre after the princess has been hunted down by samurai. The spectre is known as The Gashadokuro in Japanese folklore, "believed to haunt isolated country roads, snatching up solitary travelers to bite off their heads and drink their grouting blood" (Reed, Enger. 2016.) The Gashadokuro acted as a cautionary tale to deter people from travelling alone in rural areas. The scene (figure 3) is bursting with vibrant reds, blues and yellows, underlining the intensity and fierceness of the narrative being portrayed.



Fig 4: Kuniyoshi, U. (1830). *Eight Hundred Heroes of Our Country's Suikoden, One by One*.

A few of Kuniyoshi's works blend his interests of warriors and mythology, this Ukiyo-e of Jiraiya (figure 4) is one of many woodblock prints rendering the samurai from folklore. Jiraiya is Japan's very own Robin Hood, tales tell his story of once being an infamous bandit and then trained by a giant magic frog to take from the rich and give to the poor and suffering. The print displays the ex-brigand conquering a giant snake (figure 4), Kuniyoshi again uses dramatic expressions for both the warrior and creature, reflecting the absurd nature of the folklore he is retelling; it also reflects the potency of the scene. From the individual scales of the giant snake to the patterns on samurai's clothing, there is a great amount of detail in this print (figure 4), exemplifying Kuniyoshi's talent.

Identity

“Thematic narrative analysis revealed that the participants used tattoos to express their agency and unique identities and to represent their communion in the form of affiliation and intimacy. The participants expressed their resilience with their tattoos and the redemption narratives connected to them. Tattoos were used as reminders of the nuclear events that shaped their narrative identity and for some, incorporated the vicarious narratives from family.” (Naude, F. Naude, L. 2024)

Identity is such a broad term. It can include nationality, gender, beliefs, hobbies and so much more. For a lot of us, exploring identity, expressing oneself and celebrating originality is important. For many people, getting tattoos is an act of individualism and self expression, a way to commemorate a person, pet or experience. No reason is the same. Some individuals get tattoos simply because

they like the appeal of a certain design. In many cultures, tattoos are a way to connect to ancestors and a celebration of heritage, traditions passed down from generation to generation. “Tattoos can serve as a permanent declaration of values, beliefs, or passions. Some people choose quotes or artwork that reflect their personality or outlook on life” (Wright, AJ. 2023.)

Japan’s art has greatly influenced Western media, Ukiyo-e in many ways has specifically inspired Western artists including Vincent Van Gogh, Claude Monet, Félix-Hilaire Buhot, and more. But Japanese woodprints have also inspired within the country. Tattoo designs worn by Yakuza members, known as Irezumi, derive from Ukiyo-e and whilst tattoos have had a notoriously bad reputation for years in Japan, the designs show appreciation to the traditional art, an expression of one’s identity and connection to culture. These tattoos are characterised by bold line work and flat colours, they closely resemble the woodblock print style and that is mostly down to the fact that many Ukiyo-e artists did the tattoos themselves during the late 1800s.



Figure 5: Irezumi, Z. (2024). *Wu Song, Tiger*.

These tattoos are striking and cover large areas of a person, sometimes the entire body as Yakuza members believed “more pain in the tattoo and a larger tattoo meant that the member had a higher commitment to the group” (Henk, D. 2025.) Designs (figure 5) demonstrate the dramatic expressions and exaggerated poses, originally illustrated in Ukiyo-e artwork (figure 4), designs that include a samurai symbolises courage, honor and loyalty. It has been documented that other designs also hold symbolism - dragons, most commonly found in Yakuza tattoo designs, personifies strength, Koi fish symbolise fortune, and then cherry blossoms represent prosperity. It has also been documented that designs combined also have their own meanings, a combination of a dragon and tiger fighting embodies the fight of good and evil. Yakuza themed/ Irezumi inspired designs are prevalent in the modern day

(figure 5) and it is common for designs to not hold the same significance as originals, they are done simply for the aesthetics.

The style would be introduced to the West when American sailors travelled to parts of the Pacific and Asia, “the simple fact that American sailors lived in Japan and returned, not only with objects, but also with stories of life in a culture that was very different from their own, marked an opportunity to encourage curiosity.” (Whitmore, J. 2023.) One of the many things sailors went home with was works of art on their body in the form of tattoos.



Figure 6: Adam, K. (2025.) *Horseshoe*.

The style became popularised in the early 1900s by the working class and those serving in the military, particularly sailors, similar to the Yakuza it was common

for people to be covered almost head to toe in ink. The term 'American traditional' became common amongst those involved, even though the overall simple style remained the same and the same bold lines and vibrant yet limited palettes continued to be used, the West used the tattoo to celebrate identity differently. This style of tattoo adopted by Western symbolised patriotism and experiences, and in most cases they acted as good luck symbols and visual communication amongst communities. Designs consist of eagles, boats, roses, daggers and pin-up girls. The style dwindled with time when the industry saw the rise of other styles, however in the modern day, the style is still alive and now has evolved from its original main use in military culture and patriotic American identity.

Practice

Exploring the three key words storytelling, folklore, and identity, within the realm of Japanese wood-block print has given me insight of how the subjects are explored through the artform of Ukiyo-e and has helped me develop ideas for my third year project. Through my research, I have learnt that Ukiyo-o is deeply rooted in folklore and storytelling, and it has influenced the tattoo industry within Japan through the Yakuza which subsequently influences the western tattoo scene. Researching Japan's influence leads to my question - "How has Japanese traditional art influenced Western media?"

My third year practice will entail developing a strong portfolio of original and distinctive tattoo designs in the style of American tradition whilst also incorporating my own style for authenticity, however my take on the style will focus on personal identity instead of American patriotic identity like the style was intended for.



Figure 7: Batten, L. (2026). *Ouji*.

Each unique design will invoke storytelling, folklore and identity in some way. I have previously illustrated several designs that tell personal stories (figure 7) and in my project I plan to create designs that cover Welsh folklore and Welsh identity, as well as queer identity - both being significant to me and my life. I believe combining designs with the original Ukiyo-e medium will deepen my appreciation for the art. Not only will my practice allow me to indulge in my love and appreciation for the tattoo industry as well as traditional forms of art such as Ukiyo-e, but my practice will also act as an aid for life after graduation as my plans involve joining the tattoo world. I plan to apply for an apprenticeship and specialise in the American traditional style.

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Fig 1: Hokusai, K. (1830-32). *Snowy Morning at Koishikawa*, Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji. (Ukiyo-e; print on wood block.) Available

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Fig 2: Hokusai, K. (1835). *Hundred Poems Explained by the Wet Nurse*. (Ukiyo-e; print on wood block.) Available

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Fig 3: Kuniyoshi, U. (1843-1847). *Takiyasha the Witch and the Skeleton Spectre*,

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Fig 4: Kuniyoshi, U. (1830). *Eight Hundred Heroes of our Country's Suikoden, One by One*, (Ukiyo-e; print on wood block.) Available

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Figure 5: Irezumi, Z. (2024). *Wu Song, Tiger, (Tattoo ink on skin.)* Available

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Figure 6: Adam, K. (2025). *Horseshoe, (Tattoo ink on skin.)* Available

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Figure 7: Batten, L. (2026). *Ouji, (Procreate: digital illustration.)*