

## **In war and love: Japanese ukiyo-e prints in the Design Museum Denmark collection**

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### **Abstract:**

#### ***“Samurai Ideals in Modern Warfare? Prints of the Sino-Japanese war (1894-95) and the Russo-Japanese war (1904-05)”***

Throughout the history of Japan, war and internal strife have been a part of visual culture. During the Edo period, when the Tokugawa shogunate had ended centuries of civil war, samurai (warrior class) were no longer needed for warfare, but the figure of the samurai still provided imagery for heroic and romanticized visions of masculinity and bravery in literature, theater, and visual art. In the modern Meiji period, Japan quickly modernized and Westernized, aiming at building a modern national state on par with Western nations and joining the “club” of Western imperialism. New interpretations of samurai ethics and moral code, known as bushidō, “the way of the warrior,” became propaganda tools for the Japanese government and military in the formation of the nation-state Japan. In this presentation, I will present examples of nishiki-e, color woodblock prints, from the collection of the Design Museum Denmark in which the imaginary samurai are turned into soldiers in the modern Japanese army and navy. The prints depict scenes from the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese wars, both of which were pivotal events for Japan’s territorial expansion into the Asian continent. The prints were used for journalism, entertainment, and patriotism, and they deployed a number of visual techniques to convey their message of national propaganda to Japanese audiences. The war prints are displayed at the Design Museum Denmark as part of the exhibition entitled “In War and Love: Japanese Ukiyo-e Prints in the Design Museum Collection,” which I co-curate with Asato Ikeda. The exhibition is planned to open in April 2024, so our talks can reflect on the reception of the exhibition and the discussions it may have brought about.

***"Beautiful Women or Indentured Laborers? Visual Culture and Prostitution in Early Modern and Modern Japan"*** One of the prominent themes in Edo-period woodblock prints is the portrayal of beautiful women who worked as prostitutes in legalized prostitution districts, such as the Yoshiwara pleasure quarters, located in what is now Tokyo. The lives of these women were marked by profound contradictions. They could be seen adorned in luxurious kimonos, admired as fashion icons, and equipped with refined education in calligraphy, poetry, painting, and music, as evident in the prints and paintings from this era. Yet, it is essential to acknowledge that they had been compelled into prostitution due to their impoverished backgrounds and were constrained within isolated, walled districts, often laboring under debt bondage. After Japan opened its doors to the world in 1868, legal prostitution continued, and prostitutes, some of whom “specialized” in foreign clients, became subjects of photography for souvenir art. In discussing the upcoming exhibition, tentatively titled “In War and Love: Japanese Ukiyo-e Prints in the Design Museum Collection,” which I co-curate with Gunhild Borggreen, scheduled to open at the Design Museum Denmark in April 2024, this presentation examines the visual representations of prostitutes in early modern prints and modern photographs, contemplating on the lives of the impoverished young women.