

LAYERS OF INFLUENCE



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The contributions of Hiroshi Yoshida, an innovative printmaker, revitalized and redefined the craft of Japanese woodblock printing. This creative legacy has been borne by subsequent generations of the Yoshida family, who have used their personal interpretations of the art form to continue to direct its future



On a clear day, it is possible to see the lofty summit of Mount Fuji from a small beach in the city of Zushi, in Japan's Kanagawa prefecture. In the morning light, this scene resembles Katsushika Hokusai's print *The Great Wave off Kanagawa* from his series *Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji*. But when the setting sun casts its graded hues across the sea and the mountains, what comes to mind are the colors used in the woodblock prints of Hiroshi Yoshida (1876–1950), an artist who was born a century after Hokusai.

This style of multicolored woodblock print, called *ukiyo-e*, flowered during the Edo period (1603–1868), when pieces were commissioned by a publisher and produced through a division of labor between the artist, the engraver, and the printer. Ukiyo-e printing was hugely prominent in the late Edo period, but rapid modernization and the growing cultural exchange with the West that occurred during the Meiji period (1868–1912) meant that the style declined

in popularity compared to new techniques such as copperplate printing and lithography. There was also a growing belief that the craft lacked individual expression due to its collaborative processes.

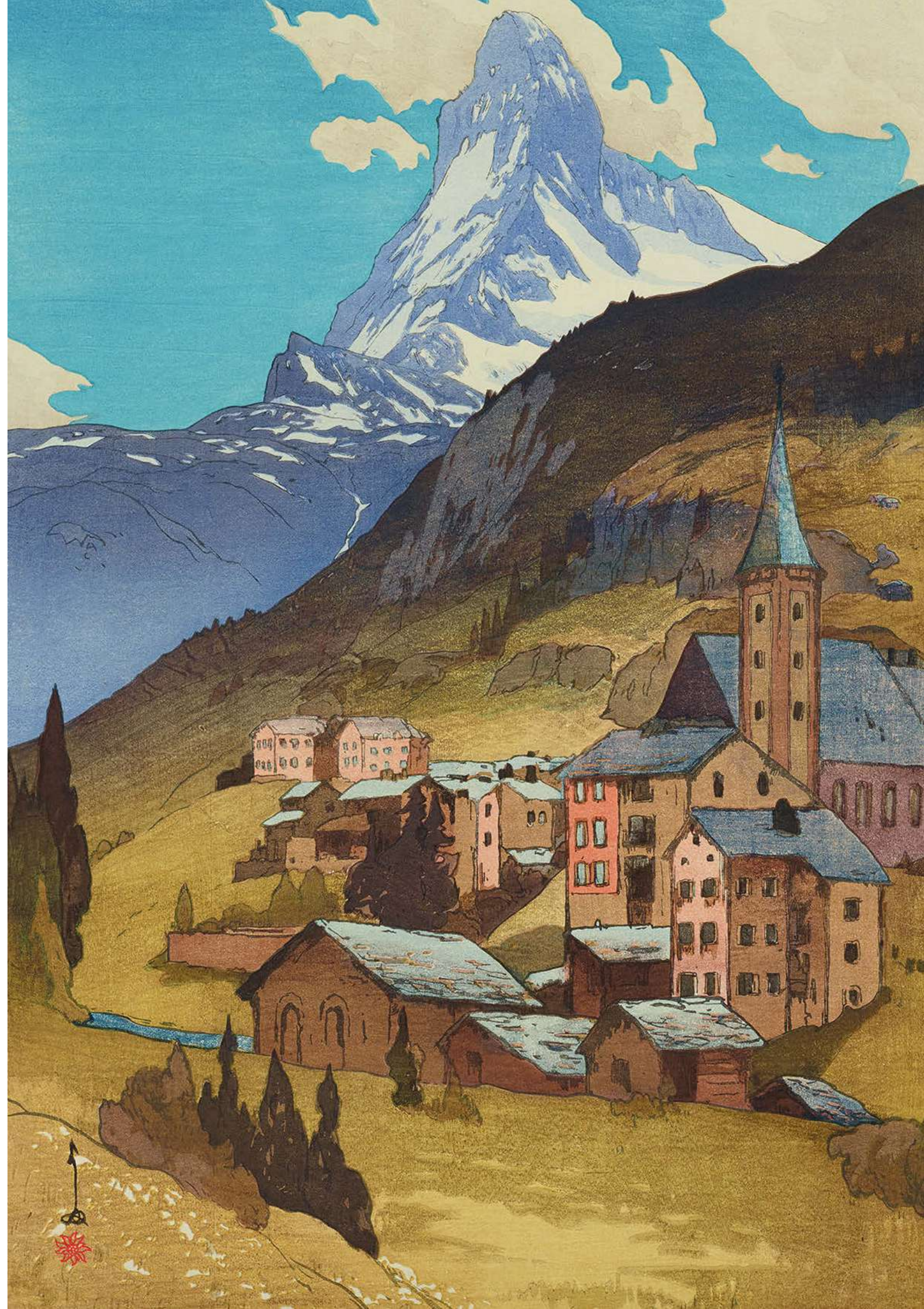
However, it wasn't long before foreign interest in Japan and ukiyo-e began to grow. In response, publishers and artists experimented with creating woodblock prints that were similar to ukiyo-e but incorporated modern, often Western, techniques and aesthetics that were better suited to Japan's new age. These came to be called *shin-hanga* (literally, "new woodblock prints").

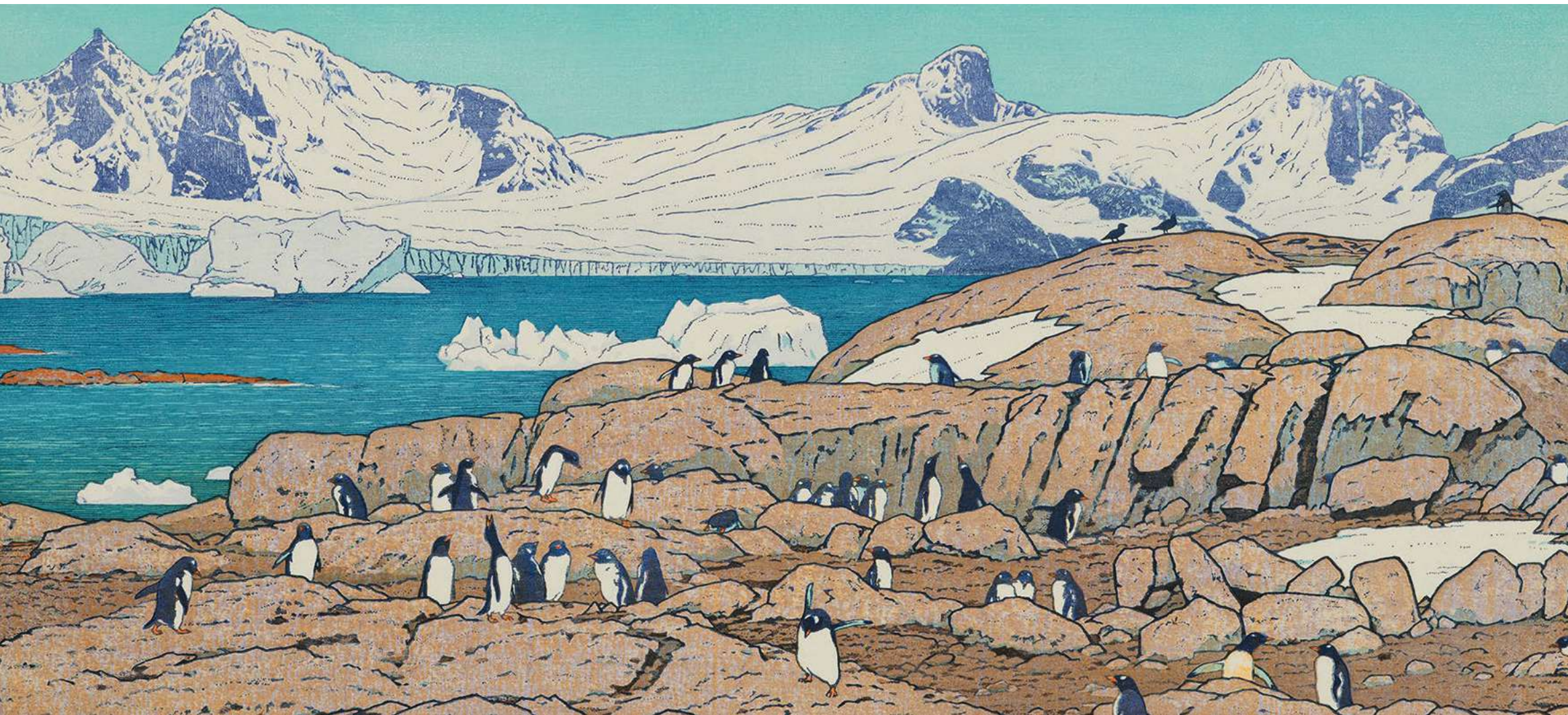
Hiroshi Yoshida traveled the world in search of scenes for his art, and in 1930 he toured India and Southeast Asia with his son Toshi. Hiroshi used 14 blocks and 55 impressions in his piece *Morning Mist in Taj Mahal, No. 5* (see page 5) to achieve the complex color gradation.

Above: Hiroshi used more than 12 blocks and 35 impressions to capture the fall foliage in this 1929 print, *Suiren Marsh at Hakkodasan*. Opposite: Hiroshi printed his 1925 piece *Matterhorn* in two versions, a day and a night view. In the bottom left is his signature red edelweiss

While shin-hanga retained the traditional division-of-labor system, its main aim was to capture the individuality of an artist's techniques and expression. A key figure of the movement was Hiroshi Yoshida, whose artistic legacy has influenced three generations of his family, of which each member has gained recognition for their individual style. Alongside Hiroshi, the extraordinary artistic lineage of the family includes his wife, Fujio (1887–1987); their sons, Toshi (1911–1995) and Hodaka (1926–1995); Hodaka's wife, Chizuko (1924–2017); and Ayomi (b. 1958), Hodaka and Chizuko's daughter.

At an early age, Hiroshi's artistic talent was recognized by his middle school art teacher, Kasaburo Yoshida (1861–1894), who adopted Hiroshi into the Yoshida family when he was 15. At 18, Hiroshi moved to Tokyo to study Western painting techniques. He primarily produced watercolor paintings, and at the age of 23, he and a fellow artist set off for America with meager funds and





From 1972 onward, Toshi Yoshida dedicated himself almost entirely to producing naturalistic prints of the wildlife he had seen on his travels, including this 1977 print *Gentoo Penguins* (top), which is based on a visit to Antarctica. In the 1972 work *Thomson's Gazelles* (right), Toshi creates a *moiré* effect by using two blocks to print overlapping parallel lines. *Black Panther* (1987, opposite) has a “repose” and “immediacy” that the Yoshida family chronicler, Eugene Skibbe, considers emblematic of Toshi’s work

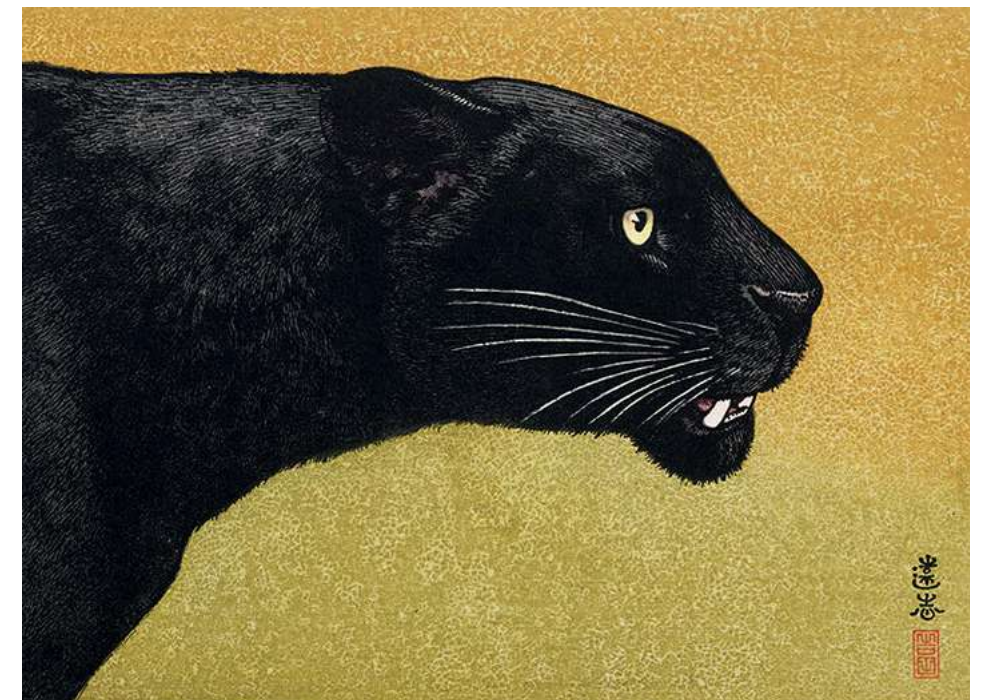


a selection of their work. With the aid of domestic and foreign supporters, the artists succeeded in mounting a two-man show in 1899 at the Detroit Museum of Art (later, the Detroit Institute of Arts). With their earnings, the pair continued on to Europe, visiting the UK, France, Switzerland, and Italy, following which they returned to the US and, finally, home to Japan.

Hiroshi continued to embark on travels around the world, seeing and sketching new and unfamiliar landscapes. In 1903, he took another art student with him on his trip, his stepsister Fujio (Kasaburo’s third daughter). After several joint exhibitions in various US cities, the pair continued their three-year journey, traveling across Europe and northern Africa before getting married in Japan.

Hiroshi began his career as a watercolor and oil painter, but at 49 he dedicated himself solely to creating woodblock prints. In the past, Hiroshi had made prints at the request of publishers who specialized

HIROSHI YOSHIDA’S ARTISTIC LEGACY HAS INFLUENCED THREE GENERATIONS OF HIS FAMILY IN AN EXTRAORDINARY LINEAGE



in shin-hanga, but working on commission made him miss having full creative control. So he employed carvers and printers to work in his studio under careful instruction, sometimes joining in the carving and printing himself. This approach allowed him to create his own unique style of woodblock prints without depending on a publisher.

Most Edo-period ukiyo-e used five to 10 color blocks, but Hiroshi averaged 30 or more and sometimes an astounding 90 colors. In particular, he used many different gray color blocks, called *nezumiban*, to carefully control the tonality and shading in his work, a technique that is more commonly seen in Western printmaking. Hiroshi’s efforts to revitalize traditional ukiyo-e by incorporating such techniques are part of the reason his work is so distinctive today.

The Yoshida brothers, Toshi and Hodaka, followed in their father’s footsteps and would come to travel the world with him. Hiroshi’s elder son, Toshi, was especially

fascinated by animals. His superb vision captured naturalistic wildlife scenes in great detail, and this passion was largely expressed during the 1970s and ’80s in prints and oils that he created after traveling around Africa. Hodaka, meanwhile, pioneered his own experimental technique that incorporated photoetching into his printmaking. Today, Hodaka’s daughter, Ayomi, creates dramatic installations by merging similar techniques.

“As an artist,” says Ayomi, “I believe that the very difficulty of the techniques involved is what makes woodblock printing so fascinating. I never met my grandfather during his lifetime, but every time I see one of his works I am amazed and I can’t help but wonder how he calculated the layering of his colors or how he was able to make such utterly perfect woodblock prints.” ♦

Translated by Jay Rubin



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