

In Search of a Floating World—Japonisme in Vienna at the Age of Anxiety

A curatorial essay by Dawn Lui

Foreword

The Treaty of Amity, Commerce and Navigation signed on October 18th 1869 between Japan and the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy marked the beginning of an intersection between central European and East Asian art.¹ The eventual Japonisme phenomena became an integral part in the timeless whimsicality of the Viennese Secessionist styles.² This exhibition emphasizes the Viennese fantasy and imaginations of a “floating world”— the translated term of the Japanese Ukiyo-e (浮世絵) meaning “pictures of the floating world.”³ The term encapsulates the core of Japonisme in Vienna— a vessel of escapism through its aesthetic liberalism. Through Gustav Klimt and Emil Orlik’s distinctive Japonisme, this exhibition intends to explore the aesthetic influences of the Ukiyo-e and how it helped create a floating fantasy hovering over fin de siècle Vienna.

Emil Orlik’s woodblock prints

Born in Prague, Emil Orlik was an instrumental figure in introducing Japanese woodblock techniques and aesthetics into the Secessionist art circle.⁴ After attending the sixth Secession exhibition based on Adolf Fischer’s collection of 700 Japanese art objects (fig.1), the artist travelled to Japan from 1900 to 1901 for the “Japanese experience” and a deeper understanding of the woodblock aesthetic and technique.⁵ Where the latter would have a lasting impact on his later works. When first stepping into Orlik’s section, his *A Gust of Wind* (fig.2) in 1901 is an instant eyecatcher on mastering the Ukiyo-e style of composition, scale and dimension. Emil Orlik was known for his Japanese trip as an academic and spiritual experience, noting his trip as to having “seen and learned a lot.”⁶ All shown through his incorporation of asymmetrical landscapes and

¹ Watanabe, Toshio, Mirjam Dénes, Györgyi Fajcsák, and Piotr Szałowski. *Japonisme in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy*. (Ferenc Hopp Museum of Asiatic Arts, 2020). 34.

² *Ibid.*, 34.

³ Ellis, James W. "The Floating World of Ukiyo-e Prints: Images of a Japanese Counterculture." *Journal of Social and Political Sciences* 2, no. 3 (2019). 702

⁴ Hánová, Markéta. "Emil Orlik: From Japan." *Journal of Japonisme* 3, no. 1 (2018). 85.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁶ Markéta. "From Japan." 101.

compositions distinctive of the Japanese style in his works. In Siegfried Wichmann's *Japonisme—Japanese influence on Western Art since 1858*, he mentions the use of diagonal lines and the “enmeshing of crowds and objects to the edges of the picture” as a Ukiyo-e motif in creating emphatic representations of scale and dimension.⁷ The explicit interruption of objects within the picture frame is distinguished in *A Gust of Wind* with one third of the willow branches omitted out of the frame, while its detailed textures on the corpus of the tree brings out a subtle sense of physical closeness. Wichmann's claim of a compositional motif is supported through landscape works of the Ukiyo-e. In Utagawa Kuniyoshi's *Station Hodogaya Through Hiratsuka* in 1834 (fig. 3), the diagonal motif is present as a swelling crowd ascending from a diagonal queue dividing the visual space into a foreground and a summit background. Where Kuniyoshi's articulate use of a sloping diagonal composition brings out a physical sense of breadth within the two dimensional constraints of woodblock printing.

It is also noteworthy to highlight the usage of trees and objects as a semiotic device to represent scale and a layered landscape, where Orlik drew inspiration from Kuniyoshi and Sakai Hōtsu to push the boundaries of dimensional limitations of the Ukiyo-e.⁸ The usage of trees as a spatial divider has been present in Edo period screens as well. In Otaga Kōrin's sketches from *Kōri Hyakuzu* in 1826, a thick tree became a compositional divider between hills and bodies of water, while one of its roots arches over the hill, creating a subtle interruption of a flat visual surface structure.⁹ Similarly, in *A Gust of Wind*, there is a jarring visual resemblance through the usage of trees as an indicator of visual depth along with *Station Hodogaya Through Hiratsuka* as well. The trees are both depicted in detail and a comparatively larger scale than its counterparts, as if the audiences are peering into the crowd from afar while standing merely inches away from the tree trunk. With the specific spatial role of the tree in mind, Orlik's work becomes a voyeuristic view of a monstrous windthrown tree that not only affects the two pedestrians but the viewer itself. Where Orlik achieved the imaginary sense of first person experience through his utilization of detailed trees to divide the landscape stage by stage, integrating static objects into a pictorial field as an active visual progression and stimulant.

⁷ Wichmann, Siegfried, and M. Whittall. *Japonisme: The Japanese influence on Western art since 1858* (Thames & Hudson, 1999). 219.

⁸ Wichmann, Whittall, *Japonisme*. 210.

⁹ Otaga Kōrin. “Kōrin hyakuzu. Kōhen, (光琳百圖)” , Vol.2 (Smithsonian Libraries, 1826) 7.

After his eventual return to Vienna and Berlin in 1901, his works in Europe still resonates influences from the Ukiyo-e. Turning left after his landscape prints, two displays of different medium summarizes the technical and aesthetic ripple that his trip to the island has left in his style. The Japanese experience he reminisced is starkly present within *The Model* (fig.4) and *Portrait of Ferdinand Hodler* (fig.5) in 1904. In *The Model*, he depicted a scene of a woman in the middle of undressing with a colourful kimono clinging to her hands, as she faces away from the audience's view. As an oil painting, Orlik still elicited a sense of the Ukiyo-e aesthetic through his inspiration from the *Katagami* stencils. In Tomoko Kakuyama's research paper *katagami—Japanese Paper Stencils and their Role in the Vienna Workshops*, he clarified the technique of the *Katagami* and its discourse as a stylistic element within the Viennese art circle from 1903 to the 1910s.¹⁰ The *katagami*, meaning “finely cut paper stencils” were printed or dyed onto kimonos and fine silks as a form of ornamentation that were frequently seen in Ukiyo-e depictions of women and theatre scenes.¹¹ These stencils often comes with a variety of decorative patterns and most frequently used onto fabrics as floral motifs where its depictions were glamorously exaggerated in Ukiyo-e prints.¹² The kimono in *The Model* is an array of decorative floral motifs which is one of the major styles of *katagami*; similar to how the stencils were decorated vigorously onto the woman in *The Kanda River in autumn Hiroshige* (fig.6). With both of their faces away from the viewing eye, while one was engulfed by the ornamental patterns and one was loosely holding towards her body. It is strongly suggestible of Orlik's *The Model* as a cumulated representation of visual styles he encountered in Japan. As he travelled through the island, he created sketches of everyday lives and streets while amalgamating a collection of Japanese prints which would be displayed in his exhibition *Orlik – Japan – Ausstellung* in Brno, 1902.¹³ Which Included a series of paper stencils for *katagami* textile dyeing and several prints on Edo period theatres.¹⁴ His interest on Ukiyo-e stencils and the theatre via his private collections was shown through *The Model* with the display of Nōh and Kabuki masks on the right corner and her decorated kimono. Hence suggesting the

¹⁰ Tomoko Kakuyama. 2009. “*Katagami - Japanese Paper Stencils and their Role in the Vienna Workshops*”, paper presented at *Conference of International Association of Design Research, Kanagawa University*,. (Saitama University) Japan. 2021.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 2021.

¹² Wichmann, Whittall, *Japonisme*. 208.

¹³ Markéta. “From Japan.” 86.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*,85

painting as either an imaginary capriccio or a proud display of his prized collections in 1902 as a reminiscence of his “Japanese experience.”¹⁵

Emil Orlik’s interest in the Ukiyo-e and theatre is further exemplified in his *Portraiture of Ferdinand Hodler*. In *The Floating World—Japanese popular prints 1700-1900*, R.A.Crighton defined *Kabuki* (歌舞伎) as “the popular theatre” depicting either historical pieces (時代物) or plays of “ordinary life” (世話物).¹⁶ However, soon after reaching its peak in 1842 the Edo theatre was severely suppressed by the “Reforms of the Tempō”. Ukiyo-e artists were prohibited to make prints of Kabuki subjects hence having to maneuver ways into promoting plays through either erasing artist’s names or creating silhouette portraits of them for anonymity.¹⁷ In Orlik’s *Ferdinand Hodler* his friend is depicted monochromatically, with merely the left out white spaces and bits of pigmented shadows indicating his facial features. The Kabuki inspiration is present—in *Silhouette Image of Kabuki Actors* by Utagawa Kunitaru in the 19th century (fig.7), the actors are cameos of black pigments only identifiable through their side profiles and stamp motifs next to their portraits. Here Orlik utilized the Ukiyo-e skill of shadows and silhouettes by imitating the contrasting dark mass on a light ground for a rustic and sharply contoured figure. Making his work a stark presentation of a person almost abstracted into a monochromatic shadow with minimal identifiable features, interrogating ways of expressing identity with minimal semiotic characteristics. The crumbs of Orlik’s exploration of identity and personal experience were scattered throughout his oeuvre in this exhibition collection. Noting on his choice of drawing inspiration from a period of cultural stagnation in Japan where unorthodox artistic liberties sprouted as a counteraction, it is plausible to speculate a deeper sense of personal socio-political fantasy in his works. The first use of the phrase “Ukiyo” was in Wantanabe Katei’s 1661 novel *Ukiyomonogatari*, where he described the “Ukiyo” (floating world) as a celebration of simple joys of life through “living for the moment” and enjoying wine.¹⁸ The idea of Zen pleasure through small moments of everyday life was brilliantly captured in Orlik’s prints. Known to be jotting sketches whenever he went and creating his works subsequently, the images presented in his prints such as *A Gust of Wind*

¹⁵ Markéta. “From Japan.” 88.

¹⁶ Crighton, Robin A. *The Floating World: Japanese Popular Prints 1700-1900*. (HM Stationery Office, 1973).8.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*,8.

¹⁸ Wantanabe Katei, *Ukiyomonogatari* (浮世物語), vol.5. (UTokyo Academic Archives, 1665) 37.

and *The Model* are not entirely ethnographic.¹⁹ Hence he was able to insert stylistic liberties of the Ukiyo-e aesthetic to further his image of Japan. From the insert of Kabuki theatre, intermix of dimensions between chiaroscuro and stencil prints, and exploration of unorthodox representations of silhouettes, Orlik inserted the abstract Ukiyo-e spirit into his works as personal imaginations of his own floating Japan.

Gustav Klimt's Ornamental Muse

One of Gustav Klimt's most iconic motif is his masterful usage of ornamentation as a visual spectacle. Upon entering his exhibition room, it is apparent that his technique creates a unique stimulation of awe and whimsicality. Inspirations from the Japanese Ukiyo-e prints are almost the lingua franca within his works, where the Japanese aesthetic helped elevate his work into theatrical visualizations of unhinged emotions. In Svitlana Shiell's *Japanese Aesthetics and Gustav Klimt: In Pursuit of a New Voice*, she suggested Japonisme as Klimt's main stimuli since the 1890s during the early years of the Viennese Secession.²⁰ Similar to Orlik, Klimt's visit to a World Fair in Vienna in 1873 exposed him to the Japanese Edo and Meiji arts, and with his advocacy Japonisme became the "Zeitgeist" (defining spirit) of the Viennese Secession.²¹ Hence it is almost irrefutable to suggest the participation of the Ukiyo-e spirit and aesthetic within his gilded Secessionist oeuvre. Navigating leftwards, *Judith II*, 1909 (fig.8) presents the heroine Judith decapitating Assyrian general Holofernes. The painting describes a fleeting moment of violence, with Judith slumping rightwards, her gaze in a flushing haze while gripping the severed head of Holofernes. Although less ornated with the precious metals in comparison to other exhibitions in the room, *Judith II* is still a flamboyant, visually stunning work of an ultimate femme fatale. Judith and her body curved to the swaying rhythm of ripple-like white lines, capturing a moment frozen in time—eliciting similarities to the usage of lines in Ukiyo-e prints. The Ukiyo-e

¹⁹ Watanabe, Toshio, Mirjam Dénes, Györgyi Fajcsák, and Piotr Sławski. *Japonisme*. 158.

²⁰ Svitlana Shiells. 2018. "*Japanese Aesthetics and Gustav Klimt: In Pursuit of a New Voice*." Paper presented at Art Nouveau International Congress. (Barcelona) 1.

²¹ Shiells, "*Japanese Aesthetics and Gustav Klimt*". 2.

undulating curves were representations of natural elements such as water and wind to dramatize and visualize events.²² Natural, even invisible elements became visual highlights standing out from the background often in terms of establishing dimensions, as seen in Koryusai's *Courtesan Dreaming a Lucky New Year Dream of Fuji, Falcon and Eggplant* in 1775 (fig.9). The visualized lines of air literally brought the courtesan's dreams into the pictorial reality, emphasizing the fantastical characteristics of lines and natural elements in the Ukiyo-e. Klimt utilizes its unique iconography as a theatrical element to merge Judith's emotional state and reality, elevating the painting into an abstract interpretation of a murder through both Judith and the audience's eyes.

Klimt's view of women as vessels of mysticism and seductive power is prominent via his ornate techniques derived from the Ukiyo-e culture of visual awe and attraction. In Eric Galowitsch's *The Femme Fatales in 20th Century Art and How they Affected the Language of Modern Art*, he defined the femme fatale as "women who attracts men with an aura", while stating Klimt's vision of the femme fatale as full of "grace" and "mystic in nature" to men.²³ Drawing the dramatizing Ukiyo-e features of natural elemental calligraphy into his works, the ornamental lines travelling between Judith and the background creates both emotional and spatial breadth visualizing the intangible aura of determination and fierceness in Judith. In turn questions the reality of the scene as if the audiences are peering into a dreamlike sequence. The ornate patterns on Judith's robes also echoes not only to other women in the collection but the technique of Japanese katagami stencils as well.²⁴ Unlike Orlik, Klimt draws the stencils out of its conventional textile boundaries. These dense, irregularly patterned motifs existing both in and out of Judith's robes were reminiscent to the "kazari," directly translated as "ornament" as a blanket term of the katagami.²⁵ In Tsuji Nobuo's *Ornament (kazari) –An approach to Japanese Culture*, he related the act of ornament and gold in equivalent to "grace" and "luxury", sometimes even with hints of seduction in portraits of courtesans.²⁶ The kazari is strikingly present within Ukiyo-e portraits of courtesans, seen from Keisai Eisen's *Oiran Parade* in 1842 (fig.10). Eisen's courtesan wears an embellished robe of waterfalls, koi fish and patterned floral motifs dyed with Katagami stencils. The undulating water parallels with her S curved

²² Ibid., 2.

²³ Galowitsch, Eric. "The femme fatales in 20th Century art and How they affected the language of Modern Art." (2017). 4.

²⁴ Kakuyama. *Katagami*. 5.

²⁵ Wichmann, Whittall, *Japonisme*. 209.

²⁶ Nobuo, Tsuji. "Ornament (Kazari): An Approach to Japanese Culture." *Archives of Asian Art* .Vol 47 (1994). 35.

posture against the strict rectangular frames complimenting her feminine figure and “bijin” (beautiful woman) status of the Ukiyo-e culture.²⁷ Where the kazari of her stencilled robes expressed her mystic, seductive aura as a famous courtesan. Seen as well with an S curved figure against a rectangular frame, Judith’s murder is polished with a morbid sense of sensual attraction and elegance spilling out of the painting and into the eyes of the viewer, helpless to her hypnotizing aura of danger and beauty.

In Klimt’s oeuvre, often a crescendo of emotions are captured within a series of works from hope, to devastation and to ecstasy.²⁸ The visual and spiritual sensations of emotions are the essence of his work that sometime extends to the exploration of spiritual philosophy. This exhibition chose to focus on Klimt’s Japonisme expression and imagination of pleasure and serenity through his pieces. Proceeding to the right corner of the showroom, Klimt’s *Fulfilment*, the finale piece from the *Expectation and Fulfilment Stoclet Frieze* in 1911 is the main spectacle of the room (fig.11). Engulfed in stunning multichromatic and gold motifs, the *Fulfilment* oversees a couple in an intimate embrace as if a climax ending of a hectic story. The stance has the couple face away from the audience’s gaze, while the man’s extravagantly decorated robe takes up one third of the pictorial space. Ornate with large circular gold patterns, the robe is reminiscent of Kabuki kimonos that are gilded with reflective “lacquer like” gold motifs.²⁹ As seen in the Karaori (Chinese weave) costume from the 18th century next to the mural (fig.12), Klimt employed the theatrical kazari ornaments of the costume into his story. Drowning in gold and the theatricality of her partner, the whole scene was elevated into a climatic display of reciprocated love. Moreover, the sense of intimate pleasure can also be distinguished in similarity to Ukiyo-e bijin erotica. Appreciative of the mortal pleasures of life, Ukiyo-e culture sees beauty and pleasures of the flesh as an element to the flow of life.³⁰ Seen in Kitagawa Utamaro’s *Lovers in an Upstairs Room*, 1788 (fig. 13), the woman faces away from the viewer, their bodies deep in each other’s embrace. The intricate details of their Kabuki robes and a horizontally rectangular frame presents a theatrical display of pleasure, as if alluring the audience to appreciate its serenity. It not only draws clear indication of Klimt’s Japonisme inspiration, but also highlights how he uses the visual and theatrical culture of pleasure within Ukiyo-e prints—

²⁷ Crighton. *The Floating World*. 41.

²⁸ Vergo, Peter. "Art in Vienna 1898-1918: Klimt, Kokoschka, Schiele and Their Contemporaries." (1981). 147.

²⁹ Wichmann, Whittall, *Japonisme*. 206.

³⁰ Katei, *Ukiyomonogatari* (浮世物語) 51.

from composition to ornamentation to enhance his imaginations of ecstatic pleasure and its emotional impact.

The viewpoint of heavenly pleasure as natural flows of life, seen from Katei's quote from *Ukiyomonogatari*—letting oneself “carried along the river” like a “calabash” as “what Ukiyo means”, is an interesting allegory as Klimt's aesthetic symbol of escapism in fin de siècle Vienna.³¹ With the rise of studies on sexuality, spirituality and decreased interest in politics since the failure of Austrian Liberalism, Vienna seemed stagnant and unbearably stoic.³² The rise of the Viennese Secession brought forth a Viennese escape into a utopic yet simplistic world.³³ Henceforth, Japonisme becomes a canvas for artists like Klimt and Orlik in bringing their ideals of life into artistic imaginations—an effort of redemption to an unending bliss free of temporal and dimensional constraints. Which is exactly what Klimt and Orlik imagined in their works—parallel “floating worlds” of their own within Vienna.

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Fig. 1 Catalogue of the 6th Exhibition (Katalog der VI. Ausstellung).Wein Belvedere, 1900.

³¹ Katei, *Ukiyomonogatari* (浮世物語) 16.

³² Kevin C.Karnes, “Fin-de-Siècle Vienna and the Utopian Imagination”, *A Kingdom Not of This World: Wagner, the Arts, and Utopian Visions in Fin-de-Siècle Vienna* (New York, 2013; online edition, Oxford Academic, 2013).9.

³³ *Ibid.*, 9.

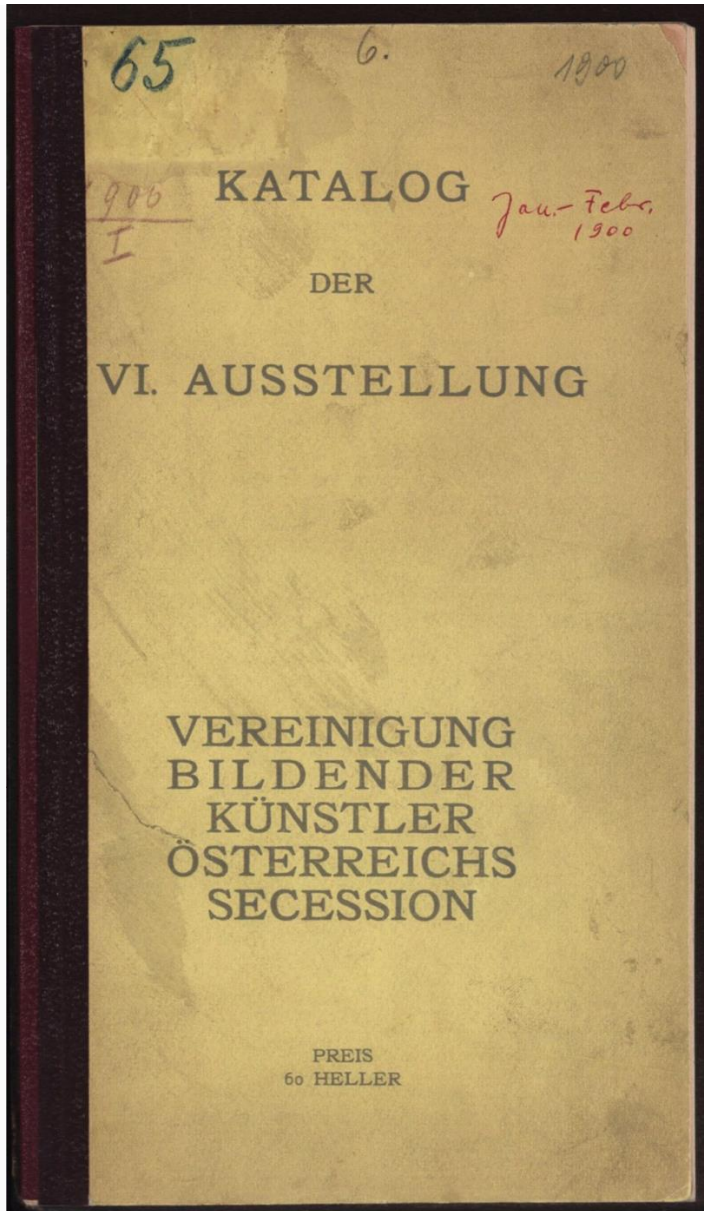
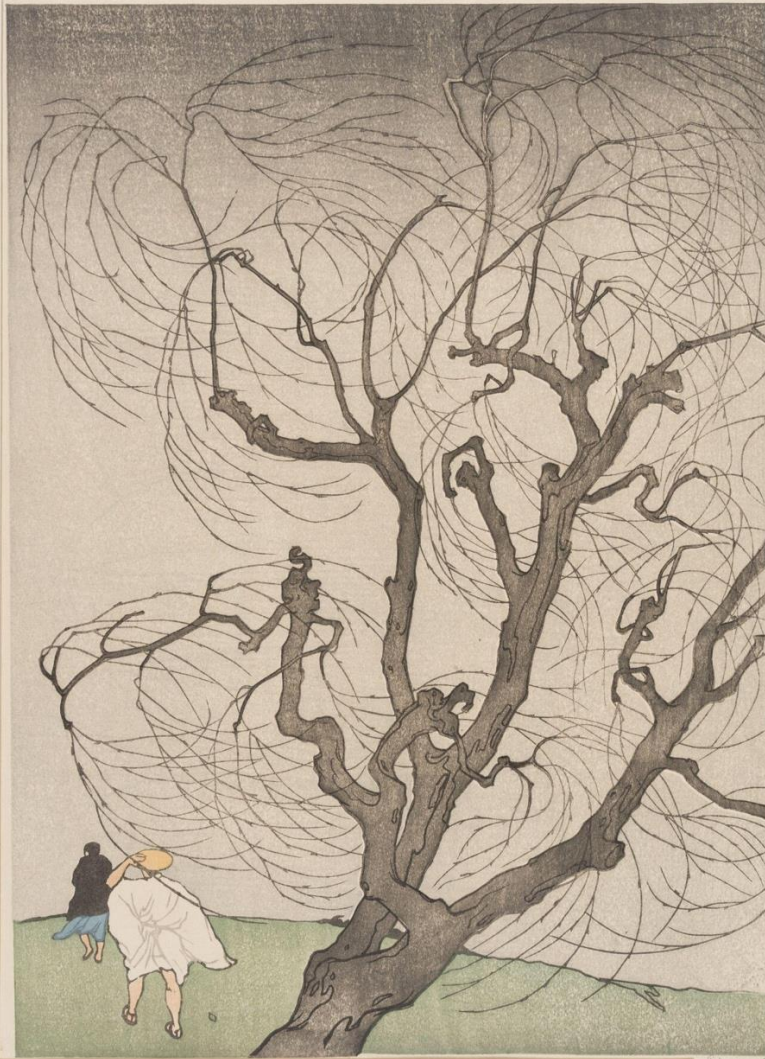


Fig. 2 Emil Orlik, *A Gust of Wind*, Woodblock Print, 1900, London, V&A Museum.



1903

Fig.3 Utagawa Kuniyoshi, *Station Hodogaya through Hiratsuka* , Colour woodblock print on paper, 1834, New York, Brooklyn Museum.



Fig.4 Emil Orlik, *The Model*, 1904, Oil on Canvas, Czech Republic, Czech Art Centre.



Fig.5 Emil Orlik, *Portrait of Ferdinand Hodler*, 1904, Woodblock Print, New York, Met Museum.



Fig.6 Anonymous, *The Kanda River in Autumn Hiroshige*, 19th century, Private Collection.



神田山下
日向山
吹の里小
深の園

香取名水鑑

香取名水鑑

Fig. 7 Utagawa Kuniteru, *Sihouette Image of Kabuki Actor*, 19th century, New York, Met Museum.



Fig. 8 Gustav Klimt, *Judith II*, Oil on Canvas, 1909, Ca' Pesaro International Modern Art Gallery Museum.



Fig.9 Koryusai, *Courtesan Dreaming a Lucky New Year Dream of Fuji, Falcon, and Eggplant*, Woodblock Print, 1774, Ronin Gallery.



Fig.10 Keisai Eisen, *Oiran Parade*, 1842, Woodblock print, Tokyo Fuji Museum.



Fig.11 Gustav Klimt, *Fulfilment Stoclet Frieze*, 1910-1911, Mosaic Mural, Austria, Museum of Applied Arts.



Fig.12, Anonymous, *Karaori (Nōh costume)*, Edo period 18th century, Japan, Tokyo National Museum.



Fig.13 Utamaro Kitagawa, *Lovers in an Upstairs Room* from 歌まくら (Poem of the Pillow), 1788, Shunga print, London, The British Museum.



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