Kawanabe Kyōsai (1831-1889)

Japan

*Hotei Carrying Three Children Across a Stream in a Bag on His Head*

circa 1880's or 1890's, Meiji period (1868-1912)

color woodcut

49.5 x 35.9 cm

0000.1963

Essay by Amanda Martin

Japan experienced great political and economic change during the late $19^{th}$ and early $20^{th}$ centuries, and as a result, art also changed. When Japan's ports were opened up to trade with the West in 1858, ideas and goods began to pour in. For art, these ideas and goods included things such as perspective, foreshortening and new chemical pigments. Kawanabe Kyōsai, one of the most popular artists of his time, was one of many artists who continued working in a more traditional style and sparingly incorporated Western techniques into his artwork. Due to his training in the Kanō painting tradition, many of Kyōsai's pieces depict a variety of traditional subjects including divine beings. His color woodblock print titled *Hotei Carrying Three Children Across a Stream in a Bag on his Head*, printed circa the 1880's, is one such piece. In this print, Kyōsai has depicted a Buddhist deity with whom his Japanese audience would have been very familiar and he was able to make the print more visually appealing by his limiting the use of Western techniques within the print.

The Buddhist deity Hotei is most recognizable by his big smile and rotund belly that protrudes out from his robe. Many people, including non-Buddhists, know Hotei as "the laughing Buddha" due to his iconic smile and overall jolly appearance. He is a popular god of contentment,

as well as happiness and is also a guardian of children. However, before he became a god, Hotei was a Chan Buddhist monk (Zen in Japanese) who wandered throughout China during the 10th century. In China, Hotei is known as Budai and is said to be the reincarnation of the Buddha of the Future, Maitreya (Miroku in Japanese). There are numerous stories about Hotei as a wandering monk. Many of these stories include curious children who try to take his bag or to open his bag so they can see what he is carrying. Other stories reveal a wide range of objects that Hotei carried in his famous bag. Among the items in the various stories were stones, food and things for him to sell so he could continue wandering and spreading the word of Buddha. Hotei became popular in Japan after the teachings of Zen Buddhism took root. Stories of the god, perpetuated in the Zen tradition, were brought to Japan by monks who had studied in China during the Kamakura period (1185-1333). By this time Hotei had already been deified. He became so popular that he was included in the group of the Seven Lucky Gods. Comprised of three Hindu gods, three Chinese gods and one Japanese god, the Seven Lucky Gods are said to sail from port to port on New Year's Eve to bring happiness and good luck to believers. His fellow gods, and one goddess, include Jurōjin and Fukurokuji from China, Ebisu from Japan and Daikokuten, Bishamonten and Benzaiten from India. Out of these seven gods, Hotei is the only god known to have been a real person, which makes him more approachable to believers.

In this image Hotei is carrying three children in his bag that is being balanced on his head with his hands. The bag is huge and folds over his head and onto his hands, yet Hotei does not seem to notice the weight of the bag. Toward the top center is the opening of the bag and there are three children huddled together. All around the children are fluid, painterly lines that seem to suggest that the children are safe despite that they are carried in a precariously balanced bag on top of the god's head. Upon closer inspection, the child on the left is covering the mouth of the

middle child and covering the eyes of the child on the right. The child on the right, in return, is covering the ears of the child on the left, while the middle child is tightly holding the child on the left. The left child is also holding the middle child, which completes the imagery for the well-known "see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil, do no evil" proverb. This proverb is popularly known and usually seen today in images of three monkeys sitting shoulder to shoulder. Even though the use of monkeys to display this proverb is popular, even with non-Buddhists, the proverb itself has a history that goes back many centuries in China. However, it is uncertain whether it first appeared in Confucian or Buddhist doctrine. The use of monkeys, on the other hand, has its origins in Japan and can be traced back to the 17th century with the image of three monkeys appearing on the Tōshō-gū Shrine in Nikko, Japan where one monkey is covering its eyes, one its ears and the other its mouth. One suggestion for the use of monkeys to display this proverb is a play on words. In the Japanese language the word "*zaru"* is an archaic negative ending for verbs, while the Japanese word for monkey is "*saru*." In Japanese while using the archaic verb ending the proverb reads as "*mizaru, kikazaru, iwazaru, shizaru*" and because *zaru* sounds similar to *saru*, the words become the names for the monkeys who reenact their name sakes. In this print, Kyōsai probably opted to use children here instead of monkeys to emphasize the god's role as a guardian of children.

Underneath the huge bag holding the children is Hotei, who is smiling broadly and making his chubby cheeks look even rounder. His very large belly protrudes from his blue robes. On either side of his face one can see the god's ears, which have very round, fat lobes indicating that he is well fed and prosperous. His robes are pulled up above his knees and the blue water of the stream he is crossing flows just under his kneecaps. All of the lines in the print are bold and energetic suggesting the happiness and strength of Hotei. Above the god, his bag, and the

children is calligraphy written in a very fluid cursive script that suggests water flowing toward the god and the stream.[1] In the bottom right corner, his more fluid signature sits above a red square seal. This seal is probably the artist's seal and not that of a publisher because there are no other publisher's marks on the print. The absence of publisher markings makes it probable that this print was commissioned by a patron and not created for mass production.

Kyōsai's career spanned the end of the Edo period (1600-1868) and beginning of the Meiji period (1868-1912). Born in 1831, his career began when he was a young boy and lasted until his death in 1889. The Edo period ended in 1868 when the Tokugawa shogunate gave control over Japan back to the emperor, thus bringing Japan into the Meiji era the same year and lasting until 1912. Kyōsai's career, despite the changes and his eccentric behavior, was extremely productive. When he was six years old he studied under the *ukiyo-e* print maker, Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1797-1862) for approximately two years before he enrolled in the Kanō school of painting by his father. He first studied under Maemura Tōwa and then Kanō Tōhaku. After completing his training with Kanō Tōhaku, Kyōsai was given the artistic name Tōiku Noriyuki. It is common practice in Japan for artists to be given an artistic name by the master they studied with, and often, these artistic names were changed quite a few times during an artist's career due to achievements or movements within their given artistic school of training.

After receiving his artistic name, Kyōsai took commissions for Kanō style paintings and also helped with restoration projects at various temples. In addition to painting, Kyōsai also started working in prints in the style of his first master, Kuniyoshi. Typically a Kanō artist would have been stripped of his name and ties to the Kanō school in such a case. The reasoning behind this was that *ukiyo-e* subjects were considered beneath the prestigious painting school and would

[1] At this time I have not been able to decipher the writing above the god's head, nor have I been able to find any translations.

tarnish the name of the Kanō school. This ban on *ukiyo-e* was due to the nature of *ukiyo-e*, in which "*ukiyo"* means "floating world" and "*e*" means picture. These images consisted primarily of woodblock prints, although there were paintings as well, that depicted images of popular culture and earthly imagery. The "floating world" was originally a Buddhist idea that pertained to the cycle of rebirth to which everyone on earth is subjected. During the Edo period, "the floating world" took on a new meaning and became primarily concerned with worldly pleasures. Many *ukiyo-e* images include courtesans or kabuki actors who had jobs in the pleasure quarters, which became the main focus of popular culture. The majority of these prints were mass-produced and sold in bookstores by the publishers who employed teams of artists, woodblock cutters, and printers. Due to his talent and the need for accomplished painters, the Kanō school ignored Kyōsai's *ukiyo-e* works. The reason behind this need is because towards the end of the Edo period the prestige and noble patronage was dwindling for the once dominant school and it needed to retain as many talented painters as possible. Eventually, Kyōsai loosened his ties to the Kanō school so he could work more freely with both prints and satirical works. In order to do this he selected his own independent artist name, Kawanabe Kyōsai.

Before the shogun gave the political power back to the emperor in 1868, he signed trade treaties with five Western nations in 1858: the United States, the Netherlands, England, France, and Russia. Before 1858, Japan had minimal foreign trade except with the Dutch. With the opening up of Japan to increased foreign trade, many ideas, items and foreigners traveled to Japan. By the time Kyōsai created this print of Hotei, the pigments being used by publishers were all from the West. Before the 1860's most of the pigments used in prints had been vegetable and mineral based colors. Some of these colors retained their vibrancy through the years; however, many were unstable and faded quickly. Blue was one of the pigments that faded

quickly and was also the first new pigment to be brought into Japan from the West around 1829. Western pigments were created using chemicals, making the colors brighter and more stable, thus preventing the quick fading seen in prints where the natural pigments were used. These chemically produced colors are called aniline pigments. In the 1860's a wide range of aniline pigments were introduced into Japan, but they did not become popular until 1870's when they were more affordable. By the 1880's these Western pigments had practically replaced the vegetable and mineral pigments. When looking at Kyōsai's print, one can see the colors still retain their hues even though they are not as garish and vibrant as many other prints created during the same period.

In his image of Hotei, Kyōsai is depicting a Buddhist deity in a traditional Japanese artistic style. The children's poses reflect religious teachings as well, whether Buddhist or Confucian, concerning "speaking no evil, hearing no evil, saying no evil and doing no evil." His use of different shades of blue to create some sense of three-dimensionality within Hotei's robes demonstrates Kyōsai's selective use of Western techniques in this particular print. By combining both the traditional subject matter and Japanese print design with a bit of Western shading, Kyōsai was able to create an aesthetically pleasing image that was a reminder to his Japanese audience not to lose sight of their traditions even with the changes the new technology from West was bringing to Japan.

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