

Okumura Masanobu (1686-1764)

Japan

Ebisu Throwing Beans at Oni on Setsubun

Edo period (1600-1868)

Hand-colored woodblock print

31.2 x 15 cm

Museum purchase: Lucy Shaw Schultz Fund

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Essay by Amanda Martin

The New Year has always been a time for celebrations, and many cultures have practices and or rituals performed to ensure a good and prosperous year. In Japan there are quite a few different New Year's customs observed for the coming year. These customs depend on which New Year is being celebrated; the New Year based on the solar calendar that falls on January 1st, the Chinese New Year that falls anywhere from the middle of January to the middle of February each year, or the New Year based on the Lunar Calendar that typically falls on February 3rd. The last of these three was of particular importance to the Japanese. One of the main practices performed on February 3rd was a spiritual spring cleansing of the home and various goods were produced for people to buy for this cleansing, including prints.

Setsubun is the word used for the New Year that falls on February 3rd, which literally means "seasonal division" and corresponds with the beginning of spring and the end of winter. During *setsubun*, there is a Bean-Throwing Festival that is used to chase away evil spirits, called *oni*, and to welcome in good luck. *Oni* are malevolent creatures in Japan and are roughly the

equivalent to Western demons and ogres in that they bring or cause bad things to happen to unsuspecting people. In the house, the beans are either thrown at a relative dressed as an *oni* or are thrown out the front door while chanting “Demons out! Luck in!” (*Oni wa soto! Fuku wa uchi!*? 鬼は外! 福は内!) and then the front door is slammed shut to ensure the *oni* stay out.

This Edo period (1600-1868) print by Okumura Masanobu, depicts the Buddhist deity Ebisu performing the Bean-Throwing ritual during *setsubun*. He is throwing beans at an actual pair of *oni* who are trying to escape the god and the beans. Ebisu is the popular God of Good Fortune as well as the Patron of Laborers and Fishermen. He is also one of the Seven Lucky Gods in Buddhism. The Seven Lucky Gods are a group of Buddhist deities who are a mix of Hindu, Chinese, and Japanese gods. They are said to ride in their dragon-shaped treasure ship to human ports bringing good luck and happiness to believers on New Year’s Eve. Ebisu is the only native Japanese deity within this group as he was originally a Shinto deity who converted to Buddhism and eventually joined the Buddhist pantheon. The other six lucky gods include Daikokuten, Bishamonten, and Benzaiten who are from India, and Hotei, Jurōjin, and Fukurokuju who are from China.

By depicting the God of Good Fortune throwing beans at *oni*, Masanobu has created an image that reiterates the purpose of *setsubun* and the Bean-Throwing Festival. In this image, Ebisu is shown wearing a hat that is bent forward, in the typical fashion of a Heian period (794-1185) courtier. His robes are multi-layered and display a large crest, not only on his left sleeve but also on both of his legs. The clothing style is similar to the costumes seen in kabuki plays with the crest prominently shown multiple times; however, the crest is an oak leaf crest and appears to have no connection to a particular kabuki family. Offerings to Shinto gods were

presented to the deities in oak leaves and so the crest may be a link to Ebisu's origin as a Shinto god.

Ebisu is also the largest figure, making him the central focal point in the composition of the print. The god stands on his left foot with his right foot raised above a fish. The fish is a red snapper and is a symbol of good luck. There is also a bamboo fishing pole held under Ebisu's left arm. Both the fish and the fishing pole are common attributes of Ebisu as the protector of fishermen. In Ebisu's left hand he is holding a square box full of beans and his right hand is lifted up above his shoulders. His right hand does not have any beans in it, however, there are beans shown flying through the air over Ebisu's head at an *oni* who is clinging to a beam slightly behind and to the right of the god. Ebisu is looking at this particular *oni* and his mouth is open, giving the viewer the impression that Ebisu is telling the demon to get out. This is reinforced by the nasty grin and down-cast eyes of the *oni* as he clings to the beam. There is a second *oni* on the rafter above Ebisu and he seems to be in the process of evading the god and the beans being thrown. Given the diagonal lines of the two *oni*, with the viewer's eyes moving from the one on the beam to the one on the rafter, Masanobu's composition suggests both *oni* are in the process of moving away from Ebisu and out of the building they were occupying.

Not only do the crisp, energetic lines lead the viewer's eyes through the print, but so do the blocks of yellow and brown color. The blocks of color and the diagonal lines direct the viewer's eyes from Ebisu's left foot up the image through his clothing to the god's hand. From his hand, the viewer's eyes travel to the *oni* clinging to the beam and then up to the top rafter and *oni*, which are the top most colored images. The *oni* clinging to the beam has some smudged color on his leg, but that does not appear to have been applied on purpose and was probably an accident occurring sometime during the life of the print as the color does not fill the *oni*'s entire

leg. Both *oni* figures are depicted in a typical manor; they have grotesque faces, horns, and very basic loin cloths. The *oni* on the rafter even has what appears to be a rice grass skirt, which is also typical attire for a demon.

Unlike later prints whose colors were applied during the printing process, this print was hand colored. At the time Masanobu was working most prints were typically monochrome with color added by hand. The combination of colors used in this print is called *tan-e* (丹絵) and the colors within this type of print generally are yellows, oranges, and browns. “*Tan*” references the overall color scheme and “*e*” means picture in Japanese. It was not until later in Masanobu’s career that a limited number of colors were applied to the print during the printing process. Prints made in this style are called *benizuri-e*, which means “red-printed picture.” Masanobu is credited with being the first to print using *benizuri-e*. Although there is no definitive proof of this, the earliest datable *benizuri-e* print is one of Masanobu’s. The technique of full-color printing, called *nishiki-e*, was developed shortly after Masanobu’s death.

Okumura Masanobu was born in 1686 and died in 1764. His career as a printmaker began with the publication of his first work in 1701 and he continued to create prints until his death in 1764. Masanobu is considered one of the great early *ukiyo-e* masters due to his many innovations in techniques and styles in printmaking. *Ukiyo-e* are images that depict the “floating world” of Edo period Japan (1600-1868). The term *ukiyo* has roots in Buddhism where the “floating world” was defined as the earthly suffering experienced by all living creatures on the planet because they are trapped in the never-ending cycle of rebirth. During the Edo period, *ukiyo* became synonymous with material culture and the pleasures of this world, primarily the pleasure district and kabuki theater. Masanobu was a very prolific artist who had a long, prosperous career. In the early part of his career, Masanobu primarily created images of courtesans from the Yoshiwara,

parodies, and illustrations for picture books. The Yoshiwara was the licensed pleasure district in the city of Edo and during the Edo period and activities in this area were very popular subjects for prints. There were even guidebooks printed for sale to instruct readers on the particulars of the Yoshiwara and the beautiful ladies who entertained within the various establishments. Parodies were images that combined older stories, religious and secular, with contemporary twists that functioned as visual puns.

Later in his career, Masanobu started to experiment with new print formats and techniques. As stated earlier, he is credited with the early version of color printing which was done during his later years. At the same time he was working with *benizuri-e*, Masanobu was also working with pillar prints and perspective within his print designs. Pillar prints were long, narrow prints created to easily fit on pillars within a home. Masanobu is credited as being the first Japanese print artist to use and develop one-point perspective, which was newly imported from Europe, in his printed images. In his image of Ebisu, one can see his use of straight lines with the beam and rafter to create a visual space for the figures. Although this image does not incorporate a clear one-point perspective, it does show Masanobu's ability to create a sense of space that he later develops further with the use of perspective.

Masanobu created hundreds of images throughout his career. This particular image is a great example of what is likely an early work because it has hand coloring rather than color applied during the printing process. It is also a beautiful piece depicting the Bean-Throwing ritual during *setsubun* and displays Masanobu's great skill as an artist. Instead of creating a stagnant image of a yearly tradition, Masanobu was playfully able to bring the subject and imagery to print with his use of lines and color. The overall image is lively and eye catching and would have more than likely had a high visual appeal to the people in the Edo period. This print

was probably bought right around *setsubun*, if not on New Year's Day, to ensure luck for the coming year with the image of Ebisu throwing beans at *oni* reinforcing the physical act of throwing beans.

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