Kawanabe Kyōsai (1831-1889)
Japan
Jigoku dayu (Hell Courtesan)
#9, series: Kyōsai raku ga (Kyōsai's Drawings for Pleasure)
1874, Meiji period (1868-1912)
color woodcut
Image: 33.5 x 22.7 cm
Sheet/Paper: 35.5 x 24.1 cm
Museum purchase: Lucy Shaw Schultz Fund
2001.0012

Essay by Ye-Gee Kwon

A woman wrapped in a striking red cloak immediately catches our eyes in this print. Seated on a chair, she dozes off with her chin resting on the palm of her hand. The ghastly yet comical skeletons surrounding her do not seem to bother her. A small attendant girl kneeling on the floor also falls asleep, oblivious to the bustling scene of skeletons. The woman in the red cloak wears hairpins with skulls on the tips, which hold up some of her hair, while letting the rest of her hair down. She also wears a sash decorated with the image of Emma, King of Hell, who has a scowling red face, bulging eyes and a long beard. This unusual outfit identifies her as the Hell Courtesan (*Jigoku dayu*), who is said to have attained enlightenment with the help of the Zen monk Ikkyū (1394-1481). While sleeping, she sees in her dream the vision of numerous skeletons dancing, drinking *sake*, playing musical instruments, playing games, and even helping one another up out of their graves. The Hell Courtesan was a popular subject for several *ukiyoe* artists, including Kawanabe Kyōsai (1831-1889), the artist of this complex, yet exciting print. At first glance, the *Jigoku dayu* (*Hell Courtesan*) print may look bizarre, scary, or even humorous. However, there are layers of divine inspiration hidden in the image.

Kawanabe Kyōsai was a prolific painter and printmaker who witnessed Japan's transformation from a feudal country into a modern state, living through the Edo period (1603-

1868) and the Meiji period (1868-1912). As a young boy, Kyōsai studied under one of the prominent *ukiyoe* printmakers, Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1797-1862). Afterward, he received his artistic training in the Kanō school, one of the most famed schools of Japanese traditional painting. However, he did not remain within the Kanō framework. Later on, he expanded his studies to include Japan's other painting traditions, the *ukiyoe* style, Chinese painting, and Western painting. With a broad background of artistic training, Kyōsai produced countless brilliant paintings, prints, and sketches. Kyōsai is often referred to as a reincarnation of Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849), the leading painter, printmaker, and caricaturist. Like Hokusai, Kyōsai produced not only paintings and prints, but also caricatures. Kyōsai's caricatures attracted both Japanese and foreign audiences. He was capable of expressing his subjects in humorous ways and delivering his critical views of society through his works. The politically active voice in his works sometimes led to his imprisonment. For example, in 1870, Kyōsai was invited to a calligraphy and painting party (*shogakai*). There, he got very drunk and painted works satirizing the authorities of Japanese government, for which he was arrested. Nonetheless, Kyōsai left a variety of paintings, illustrations, and prints, such as *Jigoku dayu* (*Hell Courtesan*), which exhibits both his imagination and talent.

Kyōsai, in particular, seemed to have been infatuated with the theme of the Hell Courtesan. In addition to this printed version, he painted this subject over and over, either complicating or simplifying the composition by adding or removing figures. For example, in several painted versions, Kyōsai depicted the Hell Courtesan with the monk Ikkyū, who converted her, and a group of skeletons. The printed version displayed here, however, does not show Ikkyū, but instead includes the Hell Courtesan's female attendant. Later, Kyōsai gradually simplified the composition by reducing the number of skeletons. Then, he removed the skeletons

all together, leaving a composition of just the Hell Courtesan and Ikkyū; the latest variations only had the female protagonist. But who was the Hell Courtesan that fascinated Kyōsai?

As mentioned briefly before, the Hell Courtesan is intimately linked with the eccentric Zen priest and poet Ikkyū, Abbot of Daitokuji temple in Kyoto. Born in 1394, Ikkyū was the son of Emperor Go-Komatsu (r. 1392-1412). Ikkyū's monastic life began at the age of five when his mother sent him to a temple to become an acolyte. At a young age, he advanced in his studies and showed piety and devotion to monastic authority. Ikkyū studied under Kasō Sōdon (1352-1428), a Zen master known for the severity of his treatment of disciples. In 1420, on a summer night, when sitting in meditation in a small boat, Ikkyū suddenly experienced enlightenment. Hearing this news, Kasō bestowed Ikkyū with an enlightenment certificate (*inkajō*) to prove his credentials as a Zen adept. Ikkyū, however, threw the certificate away and left his master and temple. Then, he travelled the country, giving people he met philosophical riddles (*kōan*) to provoke them to achieve Buddhist enlightenment. Some legends state that Ikkyū frequented brothels, and his eccentric behaviors often puzzled people. The encounter between Ikkyū and the Hell Courtesan appears to have resulted from these apocryphal stories.

According to the *Book of Sakai* (*Sakai kagami*), a local history printed in 1668, Ikkyū is said to have befriended and exchanged poems with the Hell Courtesan (*Jigoku dayu*), a courtesan of Takasu-chō in the port town Sakai. Later in 1809, a popular writer Santō Kyōden (1761-1816) embellished this story in his book, *Complete Accounts of Drunken Enlightenment in Our Country* (*Honchō sui bodai zenden*). In Kyōden's story, Ikkyū entered the brothel in Sakai and began to eat fish and drink *sake*. Knowing that this behavior was forbidden to monks, the Hell Courtesan thought Ikkyū was a fraud. She ordered dancers and singers to entertain him, while observing him through a screen from the next room. To her surprise, she saw Ikkyū dancing with the

skeletons. When she reentered the room, all was normal again. After beholding the astonishing scene, she realized that Ikkyū was no ordinary man. In the end, a faithful Buddhist monk guided a fallen courtesan to achieve enlightenment. This story also relates to Ikkyū's poem, *Skeletons* (*Gaikotsu*), which points out that the world is an illusion and that life is transient.

Buddhist beliefs in appearance and illusion must have been appealing to Kyōsai, and he embedded his *Jigoku dayu* (*Hell Courtesan*) print with clues that reminded viewers of the story of Ikkyū and the Hell Courtesan. The female protagonist in the story is the woman draped in the red robe. Her large hair ornaments and her girl attendant indicate her social position as a courtesan. Moreover, her hairpins with carved skull tips and the image of Emma, King of Hell, on her sash signify her identity as the Hell Courtesan. Unlike the story, the male protagonist, Ikkyū does not appear in the print. Although the physical body of Ikkyū is not portrayed, the ceremonial flywhisk placed near the Hell Courtesan's feet and the high, draped chair she sits on may symbolize Ikkyū. In Zen Buddhist tradition, portraits of priests have been presented to disciples from their masters as mementos and as proof of following an authentic Zen lineage. In most Zen portraits, a monk is shown seated cross-legged in a high, draped chair, his shoes on a low platform before him, and a ceremonial flywhisk in his right hand. A flywhisk symbolizes the compassion towards all beings by avoiding the killing of insects, and has become the typical accessory of all holy men, especially high-ranking monks. In this sense, both the high green chair covered with a dark blue cloth and the flywhisk next to it seem to indicate significant possessions of Zen priests, as seen in their portraits; thus, these attributes refer to the Zen priest Ikkyū. Right above the Hell Courtesan's chair appears another clue associated with the priest Ikkyū. The red round object with a yellow rope handle, which the skeleton smoking a pipe sits on, is a *mokugyo*, a wooden percussion instrument used by a Buddhist monk for punctuating the readings of the

sūtras. The viewers of the Hell Courtesan print could have easily made the connection between *mokugyo*, a standard abbot's implement, and Ikkyū.

The rest of the composition consists of skeletons, which serve as an expedient to enlighten the Hell Courtesan while representing an 'illusion' and 'transience.' As told in Kyōden's story, the skeletons are dancing. Kyōsai creatively added other types of entertainment—drinking and pouring *sake*, playing the game called *go*, playing musical instruments (such as *samisen*), arranging flowers, and pipe smoking. Furthermore, in the left corner of the print some skeletons help others to get out of their graves so they too can join the party. Kyōsai successfully describes the anatomy of the skeletal system. This convincing depiction of skeletons seems to have originated from his experience of drawing from actual human skulls and corpses. There is a story that when he was around nine years old and apprenticed to Kuniyoshi, Kyōsai fished a human head out of the Kanda River and sketched from it. Even though both skulls and skeletal forms of the body look rather scary, the natural movements and interactions among the skeletons create rhythm and humor.

In addition to the story of Ikkyū and the Hell Courtesan, another divine motif appears to have inspired Kyōsai. The intense red robe of the Hell Courtesan resembles that worn by Daruma (*Bodhidharma* in Sanskrit), the First Patriarch of Zen Buddhism. As an immigrant Indian monk, he is credited with the development of Zen (*Chan* in Chinese) Buddhism in the sixth century. Daruma stands for discipline, self-reliance, and resoluteness, as revealed by his nine years of facing a wall in the cave, meditating and not speaking. According to legend, Daruma is even said to have fallen asleep seven years into his nine years of intense wall-gazing meditation. Becoming angry with himself, he cut off his eyelids to prevent it from happening again. In an attempt to illustrate his origin and underscore characteristics, the visual representations of Daruma mostly

appear masculine, sturdy, and unshaven. Nevertheless, since the Edo period (1603-1868), artists have depicted Daruma impersonating females, as seen in the case of Kyōsai's Hell Courtesan wearing the red robe. The first person who portrayed Daruma as a woman was Hanabusa Itchō (1652-1724). He painted a half-length figure of Daruma with a courtesan's face, after hearing the remark of a Yoshiwara courtesan named Handayū. She laughed at Daruma's unavailing wall-facing meditation of nine years, claiming that she would be more enlightened than the patriarch because she herself had sat on display in the brothel for ten years. This type of appropriation, combining at least two completely different subjects, such as Daruma and courtesans, was intended to create witty allusions and visual parodies, referred to as *mitate-e*.

Kyōsai's *Jigoku dayu* (*Hell Courtesan*) print comes from the series "Kyōsai's Drawings for Pleasure" (*Kyōsai rakuga*) of fifteen prints on the themes of parodies of the Meiji period (1868-1912) when Japan was experiencing significant changes in government and society. In addition to this socially satirical overtone, however, the *Jigoku dayu* (*Hell Courtesan*) print represents the story of a fallen woman who was enlightened by the Zen monk Ikkyū, which deeply inspired Kyōsai.

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