

Hiratsuka Un'ichi (1895-1997)
Japan
Ikarugadera Temple in Early Autumn
1942, Shōwa period (1926-1989)
woodcut
73.5 x 59.5 cm
Gift of Mark Roeyer
1978.0109

Essay by Kirsten Marples

Hiratsuka Un'ichi's print, *Hōryū-ji Temple in Early Autumn* from 1942, is a modern reinterpretation of the pagoda at one of the most renowned Japanese temple complexes, Hōryū-ji. Hiratsuka's subjects are most often modern views of the famous gardens, temples and religious sites of historic Japan. By documenting the utter beauty and strength of celebrated religious imagery in elegant, decorative woodblock prints, Hiratsuka achieves an appealing relationship between contemporary art practices and ideas about nature and spirituality, suitably fitting the theme of this exhibition, Divine Inspiration. The accessibility of Hiratsuka's woodblock prints has provided viewers with new or revisited experiences of traditional places.

Hiratsuka Un'ichi (1895-1997), was born in Matsue, in Shimane Prefecture, where he was able to appreciate the grand, natural wood buildings of Izumo Taisha, one of the most prominent Shinto shrines in Japan. Through this experience, and in conjunction with encouragement from his architect grandfather and lumber-dealer father, Hiratsuka gained a deep veneration for the power of wood and the natural world. He spent the majority of his life studying art, beginning with Western style oil painting at the Hongo Institute in Tokyo, later to specialize in the art of printmaking and woodcarving, within which he became one of the most distinguished technicians and instructors in the craft, ultimately teaching at schools such as Tokyo School of Fine Arts. The artist is known around the world for this expertise and in 1970 was awarded the Order of Cultural Merit by the Japanese Government, the first printmaker to be

so honored. Hiratsuka spent the majority of his last thirty years (1962-1994) living in the United States, where his daughter lived, making many prints of American monuments and historical sites.

During the 1920s through the 1960s, Hiratsuka became one of the most instrumental printmakers of the *sōsaku hanga*, or Creative Print, Movement, throughout Japan. The Creative Print Movement is thought to have begun with the revolutionary print from 1904, *The Fisherman* by Yamamoto Kanae (1882-1946), in which the artist carved and printed the image from his own drawing, challenging the time-honored tradition of splitting the functions of artist and artisan. This sparked a group of individuals to develop a new standard contrasting the traditional system in which the artist merely designed the print, leaving the carving of the blocks to one technician and the printing to yet another; instead the Creative Print artists championed the idea that the artist themselves must design, carve, and print their own works.

Hiratsuka often chose the timeless architecture of Japan as the subject matter for his prints. He captured an element of nostalgia by printing historic, inspiring images, yet he also used fresh, contemporary interpretations. Hōryū-ji, originally called Ikaruga-dera, was a temple complex said to have been commissioned by Prince Shōtoku around 607. The temple was rebuilt and renamed (Hōryū-ji) after a fire occurred some sixty years later. Hōryū-ji (Temple of the Exalted Law) is still located in Ikaruga, Nara Prefecture. Japanese temple complexes of the seventh century housed wooden structures, which displayed architecture techniques and styles characteristic of early China.

In general, pagodas in Japan are slender structures with several stories of wide-eaved roofs, capped by a tall finial. The function of the pagoda evolved from early Buddhist *stupas* in India, commemorative dome-shaped monuments used to house sacred relics. Over the centuries,

the form of the pagoda evolved throughout Asia, as Buddhism traveled from India to China and Korea, and onto Japan. In Japan, pagodas were constructed to resist the forces of earthquakes and typhoons, while maintaining the function of enshrining sacred Buddhist relics. The pagoda at Hōryū-ji is a five-story structure made of Japanese cypress (*hinoki*), which was finished in 711. It and other structures at Hōryū-ji are among the oldest wooden temple buildings in the world. This pagoda is especially pleasing because of its simultaneous impression of elegance and permanence. The weightlessness and grace of the building is created by the fifth story of the pagoda being approximately half the width of the first story and by the gradual tapering of the width and height of each floor; thus creating a distinct sense of symmetry and mathematical proportion. A pent roof midway up the first floor was later added for stability reasons.

Hiratsuka is known to have collected Heian period (794-1185) Buddhist prints and was interested in combining aspects of their powerful simplicity along with the strength found in *sumizuri-e* (black-ink printed pictures) made by seventeenth-century artists such as Hishikawa Moronobu (1618-1694). Hiratsuka took inspiration from the religious aesthetic found in the Buddhist prints, the direct, elegant lines in the monochrome ink prints of Moronobu, and from stylized elements found in various forms of folk art. While he experimented with printing in color through the 1930s and 40s, it was his keenness for these Buddhist prints and monochrome prints that urged Hiratsuka to become more interested in black and white prints. He was attracted to the simplified techniques of these traditional styles, and thought color weakened the power of stark black ink on white paper. Instead he focused on the richness of the ink, reverting back to the monochrome styles of traditional Japanese printmaking. Hiratsuka is well known for creating his own engraving tools that he sharpened into U and V-shaped chisels, which formed sharp, abbreviated, jagged strokes throughout the printing process. He often went through a

repetitive re-inking process, using the finest quality inks and paper, penetrating the black ink more deeply into the fine paper, with the goal of making the white negative space come alive. This re-inking process combined with his signature technique of *tsuki-bori* or thrusting/poking strokes, in which he gouged sideways into the wood block, creates the striking contrast of black versus white in his prints.

Hōryū-ji Temple in Early Autumn is one of Hiratsuka's most popular prints. The Hōryū-ji pagoda is placed at the center of the composition, framed by decorative foliage, placing the emphasis on the glory of this religious building. The details and ornamentation of the pagoda are faithful to the actual structure. This can be seen when looking at the finial on top of the pagoda—Hiratsuka includes the nine rings (*kurin*) stacked vertically along the shaft, the open work “water flame” design (*suien*), and the sacred jewel of Buddhist wisdom (*hōju*) at the very top. The artist contrasts this accurate detailing by rendering the surrounding trees in a more decorative, stylized technique. Hiratsuka began most of his prints by converting a sketch into a drawing on thin paper, pasting this drawing facedown on a block of wood, and then cutting away all but the thin lines of his drawing. His technique essentially became drawing with his knife and is very visible in this print in the series of rugged, abbreviated strokes that combine together to form such rich, detailed pattern. This is especially evident in his attention to each roof tile of the foreground building (perhaps the *chūmon*, or central gate), simply created by the undulating, rough movements of his chisel. Hiratsuka visited Buddhist temple sites often throughout his lifetime, where he cultivated a fascination for ancient mold-shaped roof tiles.

This print juxtaposes contemporary, experimental printmaking techniques such as bold chisel cuts and varying jagged textures, with traditional Japanese religious imagery. With the print's large format (73.5 by 59.5 cm) and central composition of the five-story pagoda of

Hōryū-ji, importance is given to this honored building. Hiratsuka took his basic vocabulary of rugged strokes, black and white contrast, and his modern worldview rooted in Japan's past, to further a revival in woodblock printmaking.

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