

Suzuki Harunobu (1725-1770)
Japan
Courtesan Offering a Pipe to Bodhidharma
1765, Edo period (1600-1868)
woodcut
27.5 x 19.5 cm
William Bridges Thayer Memorial
1928.7580

Essay by Kirsten Marples

Suzuki Harunobu's print, *Courtesan Offering a Pipe to Bodhidharma*, from 1765 introduces a legendary Buddhist figure into the contemporary world of the Edo pleasure quarters offering a humorous comparison of the two vastly different realms. Harunobu, known for his images of young beauties and having a fondness for handling witty subjects in a satirical matter, juxtaposes an exquisite, elegantly attired courtesan with the image of a hairy man with protruding eyes, the legendary Zen Buddhist monk, Bodhidharma (Daruma in Japanese). Harunobu's print brings another level to the theme of this exhibition, "Divine Inspiration in Japanese Prints," because Harunobu not only creates an image of an important religious figure, but he also illustrates the world of entertainment in eighteenth-century Edo. This image illustrates divine inspiration in Japanese prints, and also humorously demonstrates the inspiration of the divine, through the pairing of the Buddhist figure with the Yoshiwara courtesan, possibly reminding the viewer of the humanity of religious figures.

Not much is known about the life of Suzuki Harunobu (1725-1770), except that he was born and lived in Edo (present-day Tokyo) Japan, and is considered a paramount artist of the *ukiyo-e* movement (literally, pictures of the floating world) in its early stages. *Ukiyo-e* is a genre of Japanese wood-block prints lasting from the seventeenth through twentieth centuries, which focused on the ephemeral, impermanent, fleeting world of the entertainment realm. In *ukiyo-e*, prior to Harunobu, most prints were in black and white, hand colored, or only used one or two

colored blocks throughout the printing process. However, it was Harunobu who developed and perfected the revolutionary technique of producing polychrome wood block prints (*nishiki-e*, or brocade prints), a process using around fifteen different colored-ink blocks, which ultimately produced a colorful and intriguing finished product. The artist's original family name was Hozumi, his given name was Jihei, and he often used the elegant pseudonyms Chōeiken and Shikojin as his artist name when signing his works. Although this specific print is not signed, it is confidently attributed to him. In the first part of his career (1754-1765), Harunobu focused on prints of actors from the kabuki theater, later transitioning to images of *bijin*, or beautiful people. Around 1764, the artist began receiving commissions for privately published calendar prints (*egoyomi*) by wealthy samurai, in which his first *nishiki-e* (polychrome prints) were produced. *Egoyomi* were often exchanged among the members of the elite literary circles, possibly leading to competition that resulted in the creation of polychrome printing. This print has been identified as a second state *egoyomi*, with the calendar marks removed; it has been suggested that this was as a result of the popularity of Harunobu's prints and their reissuing for commercial sale. His female figures (*bijin*) are notably small with very dainty features, showing child-like prettiness and delicacy, and also displaying characteristics of the Torii School, a notable school of painting and printing founded in Edo. Harunobu may have also looked to Chinese Ming Dynasty painting manuals, which were used in Japan to train artists in painting techniques.

The descriptive title of this print, *Courtesan Offering a Pipe to Bodhidharma*, essentially illustrates the content of this image. A Yoshiwara courtesan in lavish, draping robes sits holding a long-stemmed pipe in front of a *tokonoma*, a recessed alcove common in Japanese households. A *tokonoma* typically holds a hanging scroll on the back wall, and an arrangement of flowers or other objects of value on the base. In this case, the *tokonoma* includes a bamboo vase of tiger

lilies and a hanging scroll with an image of Bodhidharma, a celebrated Zen Buddhist patriarch. Next to the courtesan sits a tobacco box and a smoking set. What is notable about this image is that Bodhidharma has been brought to life by the stimulation of the presence of such a beautiful, young woman, and is reaching out of the painting towards the courtesan as if gesturing for the pipe she holds. The female courtesan in this print is detached and emotionless—one could say, as tranquil and self-sufficient as a Zen monk should be. On the other hand, Bodhidharma, the actual Zen monk, traditionally so impassive, is here the quintessence of unease and distraction. The beauty and alluring presence of the courtesan stirs Bodhidharma to life, and he reaches out of the hanging scroll, defying his inner awareness, and interacting with the woman.

The religious figure in this print is Bodhidharma, an Indian monk who lived in China around 500 C.E., and who was the legendary founder of Chan (Japanese: Zen) Buddhism. Zen practice emphasizes meditation and personal insight over extensive rituals or reliance on text. It is said that Bodhidharma crossed the Yangtze River, the longest river in China, while standing on a single reed, and it is in this context that Bodhidharma is often shown in paintings and prints. In *Courtesan Offering a Pipe to Bodhidharma*, as in most visual representations, Bodhidharma is depicted as a hairy figure with large, wide eyes, holding a flywhisk. It is believed that Bodhidharma meditated in a cave near the Shaolin Monastery for nine years, not speaking once. Some believe that after falling asleep momentarily, Bodhidharma was so angered with himself that he cut off his eyelids to prevent himself from falling asleep again—hence the substantial, exposed eyes in this print. Also, but not in this case, Bodhidharma is often depicted with no arms or legs, due to a belief that his limbs fell off as a result of atrophy, from immobility during his nine years of meditation. Portraits of Bodhidharma were given to Zen disciples and displayed as images of dedication and piety in reminder of the transmission of the Buddhist law.

When looking deeper into this print, it becomes evident that it is part of another class of *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints, that of *mitate-e*. *Mitate-e*, or parody pictures, are prints that transpose past events or traditions into contemporary manners and customs. Religious subjects, specifically those associated with Zen Buddhism, are numerous among *ukiyo-e mitate-e* prints. The essence of *mitate-e* is usually a humorous one, juxtaposing two dissimilar ideas within a modern setting. One of the most common *mitate-e* juxtapositions that reference religion is the interaction of a courtesan with Bodhidharma, as is evident in this scene.

The depiction of Bodhidharma with a woman is a very popular theme, beginning in the seventeenth century. When the patriarch is illustrated in the presence of a woman, the woman is generally identifiable as a courtesan. This entertaining comparison is thought to have originated with the artist Hanabusa Itchō (1652-1724), who was said to have painted a female Bodhidharma, in reaction to a sharp statement he heard from a real-life courtesan. When being told about the legend of Bodhidharma meditating in front of a wall for nine years, this Yoshiwara courtesan, Handayū, allegedly claimed that she was more enlightened than the patriarch who sat in meditation for nine years, because she, as a courtesan, endured faithfully remaining in a cage for ten years. The comical juxtaposition of a Yoshiwara courtesan to the legendary Zen patriarch is the heart of this *mitate-e* print, and the comparison of the difficulties of their lives offers a humorous, yet thought-provoking experience to the viewer. The witty use of the Zen patriarch in this print also offers a comment on the essence of Zen Buddhism, that perhaps the comical imagery represents the freedom from convention emphasized in Zen Buddhism. Another dimension to the relationship between Bodhidharma (Daruma) and courtesan is that in the Edo period, it was very common in the vernacular for Daruma to be used as slang for prostitute. It has been suggested that the etymology of this term originates with the *okiagari* (getting up)

Daruma dolls, a traditional Japanese doll and a symbol for perseverance and resilience. These dolls are round with no arms or legs, constructed in a way that when they are toppled over, they immediately rise up again, and it has been suggested that prostitutes resemble the same *okiagari* resilience in their profession.

Suzuki Harunobu, regarded as the originator of the Japanese polychrome print (*nishiki-e*), effectively parallels the hardships resulting from faithful devotion to one's religion with Bodhidharma and to one's career with the courtesan, in a witty, satirical manner in the *mitate-e* print, *Courtesan Offering a Pipe to Bodhidharma*. The result is an image bursting with enormous charm and depth, as the viewer admires the wit in the allusion of the subject matter, unraveling the many layers of meaning. Harunobu who fittingly went by the artist name "Shikojin," meaning "someone who reflects on the past," masters that exactly, but also incorporates his knowledge of the complexities of contemporary Edo Japan.

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