

Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849)
Japan
Queen Mother of the West (Jp. Seiōbo, Ch. Xiwangmu)
From the series: *A Pair of Screens (Byōbu issō no uchi)*
ca. 1800-1806, Edo period (1600-1868)
color woodcut (*surimono*)
19.6 x 9 cm
Gift of William Bridges Thayer Memorial
0000.1620

Essay by Myenghee Son

This small print by Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849) depicts the Queen Mother of the West (Jp. Seiōbo, Ch. Xi wangmu) and the jade maiden, her attendant, riding in an imperial carriage of clouds. Wearing an archaic Chinese robe, the Queen Mother stands with dignity and grace, looking slightly back toward the maiden. The long fluttering hem of her dress and the cloud carriage not only transmit a sense of floating but also emphasize her status as a transcendent being.

The Queen Mother of the West was one of the oldest and most widely venerated deities in the Chinese pantheon, who emerged by the third century B.C.E. as a significant deity. The cult of the Queen Mother of the West also spread beyond China to Japan and Korea in ancient times. She was believed to reside on Mount Kunlun, a mythical paradise located to the far west of China, where she ruled over the realm of immortals. She was associated with metal (one of the Five Phases or Elements), autumn, and the west, all aspects of the *yin* force of the *yin-yang* polarity.

The presence of peaches is one of the major iconographic features signifying her identity, along with her floral headdress, which is decorated with a single phoenix at the center. Legend has it that the peach trees in Kunlun paradise blossom every three thousand years and that the fruit confers immortality upon those who eat it. Here, instead of the fruit, a peach blossom appears behind the carriage of clouds, signifying that spring, bearing the fruit

of immortality, has come. Given the Queen Mother's association with immortality, this print may have been produced as a prayer for someone's longevity. This assumption can be supported by the accompanying verse, which sings of the Queen Mother's peaches and getting older. Then, in what situation was this print made? The classification of this print as *surimono*, which uses rich paper and deluxe materials, offers insight into this question.

Surimono (literally "printed things") are privately published woodblock prints combining image with text, usually either *kyōka* (31-syllable witty verses) or *haikai* (17-syllable verses on seasonal themes). *Surimono* gained popularity in the cities of Osaka and Edo (present day Tokyo) during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Well-educated, wealthy and aesthetically discerning clientele usually commissioned these prints. *Surimono* were printed as a tasteful and sophisticated means of celebrating the New Year among the literati. As gifts and congratulatory greetings, they took on the functions of reaffirming relationships after the change of year, and offering positive wishes for the coming temporal cycle.

The verse component, the most distinguishing feature of *surimono*, usually focuses on the related celebratory themes of early spring established in *waka* (court verse). The emphasis on subjects of early spring in *waka* was adopted by the *surimono* artists, and an element in the picture indicates the season as the peach blossoms do in this print. Also, many *surimono* verses for the New Year refer to health, wisdom, beauty, vigor, long life, and good fortune. The Queen Mother of the West, a symbol of immortality, is an appropriate subject for the New Year *surimono*. In addition, the Queen Mother of the West is closely associated with the rites of world renewal that occurred during the first weeks of the New Year.

Ukiyo-e artists took the role of creating illustrations to accompany poems. For this *surimono* print, the artist, Hokusai, created an appropriate illustration to celebrate the New

Year by reinterpreting the poem and the tale of the Queen Mother. Instead of depicting the common image of the Queen Mother in the peach garden of Mount Kunlun, he represented the Queen Mother riding in the carriage of clouds, leaving her immortal paradise. This scene is reminiscent of her famed visit to the Emperor Han Wu-ti (156 – 87 B.C.E.) of China, who loved the ways of the immortal beings and was said to have obtained the immortal peaches from the Queen Mother when she visited his palace in her carriage of purple clouds. It seems that the Queen Mother is going to visit the recipients of this *surimono* to share her secret of immortality on the New Year. Therefore, the illustration not only contributes to creating resonance for the poem but also to enhancing the reader's pleasure.

With this creative and artistic design, the elaborate and extraordinary craftsmanship as well as the high quality materials of this *surimono* catch the viewer's eyes. Delicate embossing techniques give tactile effects, and fine quality colorants, metallic pigments, and thick paper enhance the beauty of the work. Even though he achieved his world-famous renown for his great commercial prints such as "The Great Wave" from the series *Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji*, Hokusai was also one of the most sophisticated, prolific, and pioneering *surimono* artists. During his seven-decade-long career, he designed more than one thousand *surimono*.

Most of Hokusai's *surimono* were produced during the period when the artist used "Sōri" and "Hokusai" as his art names (1794-1809). He accumulated a long list of art names by changing them often throughout his long lifetime. During the apprenticeship period at the studio of Katsukawa Shunshō (1726-92), Hokusai used the name "Shunrō," conferred by his teacher. Two years after Shunshō's death, Hokusai started to use Sōri as his new art name. Around the autumn of 1798, he adopted his most famous art name, "Hokusai," and then he changed it again to "Taito" at the New Year of 1810. Despite this change, he continuously

used “Hokusai” as his primary name afterward, often incorporating it in later art names by using phrases such as “formerly known as.” During his “Sōri” and “Hokusai” period, he was connected with *kyōka* poets, especially those who belonged to the Asakusa poetry group. The fact that the artist lived for an extended period around 1800 in the Asakusa district of Edo might explain this special connection.

This *surimono* has an inscription signed “Gakyōjin Hokusai,” meaning “Hokusai, Man Mad about Drawing.” Hokusai used this art name, Gakyōjin Hokusai, for six or seven years at the most, from about 1800 to 1806. This art name appears almost exclusively on private commissions, indicating the artist’s attempt at the “branding” of his name and style at the upper end of the publishing market. Thus, Hokusai might have produced this *surimono* between 1800 and 1806 through the private commission of *kyōka* poet, Fujimitei Takasumi, whose verse appears on this *surimono*. The extraordinarily refined appearance of the Queen Mother reveals the stylistic affinity with women in Hokusai’s other *surimono* produced during this period. The oval face with sharp chin, slender and elongated body, arched eyebrows, and small eyes and lips are distinguishing features of Hokusai’s female figures as we can see in his “Woman and Chinese Warrior Reading a Letter” from the *Kyōka goshiki zuri* (Poems Printed in Five Colors) series produced in 1802.

This *surimono* is one of the sheets produced in a series titled *Byōbu issō no utchi* (A Pair of Screens). The format of the print is *jūni-giri ban* (each approximately 20 x 9 cm), which was created by dividing the standard-size paper, *ōbōsho* (39.4 x 53 cm), into twelve sheets. This relatively small size was one of the most common formats for *surimono* during the first decade of the nineteenth century, as *surimono* series became popular. With other sheets in the same series which are now unknown, this sheet of *surimono* was probably distributed among a specific audience, members of a *kyōka* group, to celebrate the New Year.

Given the title of the series and the unusual frame that surrounds the picture, this *surimono* could have been created as the design for a pair of folding-screen paintings and more possibly a miniature version of such screens.

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