

Color woodblock prints vibrantly convey the popular urban culture of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Edo, now called Tokyo. In a book that brings together two of Edos most colorful traditions, prints and kites, John Stevenson celebrates the charm and significance of the mass-produced but often elegant broadsheets known as ukiyo-e. The term means pictures of the floating world, a pun on a Buddhist concept of the fleeting world of desires that is, coincidentally but poetically, appropriate for a study of kites borne on the wind. Edo artists experimented with woodblock-printing techniques during the eighteenth century as kite-flying became increasingly popular. Each influenced the other: kite-makers copied woodblock-print designs to decorate their creations of bamboo, cloth, and paper, and printers used images of kites in their designs. The prints from the Skinner Collection illustrated in this book are products of Tokugawa Edo (1603–1867) and Meiji Tokyo (1868–1912). They record highlights of the Kabuki theater, brothels, and Sumo wrestling, enthusiastically presenting star actors and celebrity courtesans and vignettes of everyday life. These images capture for us the character of life as it was lived and imagined by the printmakers and kite-fliers of Old Japan. It seems that everyone thrills to the sight of a kite straining upward into the sky, and woodblock prints are perhaps the most accessible form of traditional Japanese visual culture; kite aficionados and lovers of Japanese art alike will be delighted by this study.

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