

Kōgyo: The Art of Noh

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The University of Pittsburgh Library System (ULS), which holds the largest collection of Tsukioka Kōgyo 月岡耕漁 (1869-1927) color woodblock prints outside of Japan, has digitized four complete sets that depict the noh theatre. This online collection comprises the largest digital representation of Kōgyo's work freely available online. The set contains: *Nōgaku zue* 能楽圖繪 (Pictures of Noh), *Nōgaku hyakuban* 能楽百番 (Prints of One Hundred Noh Plays), *Nōga taikan* 能画大鑑 (A Great Collection of Prints of Noh Plays), and *Kyōgen gojūban* 狂言五十番 (Fifty Kyōgen Plays) and is available via the website: [Kōgyo: The Art of Noh](#).

As the preeminent graphic artist of the noh and kyōgen theatres, Kōgyo created circa 700 Japanese woodblock prints, 60 paintings, 100 illustrations for Japan's first graphic magazine, *Fūzoku gahō* 風俗画報, and many postcard pictures of noh and kyōgen plays from the early-1890s until his premature death in 1927. Kōgyo also produced paintings and prints of flowers, birds, and even wartime scenes, but he is best known and remembered for his theatre paintings and prints.

Noh, a theatre form that originated in fourteenth century Japan, is a combination of dance and drama that plays on themes of both the supernatural and the natural. It was associated historically with the ruling warrior class, which made up about 5 percent of Japan's pre-modern population in the late feudal period between 1600 and 1868. But with the demise of the samurai feudal order after Japan met the post-industrial revolution West in the 1860s, noh also had to compete for audiences not only with other kinds of traditional theatre such as kabuki and bunraku, but also with a variety of new forms imported or adapted from the West.

Graphic representations of noh themes were important to this revival of noh. The print artist Tsukioka Yoshitoshi 月岡芳年 (1839-1892), and to a much greater degree his stepson Kōgyo, and then Kōgyo's daughter Tsukioka Gyokusei 月岡玉瀨 (1908-2009) and disciple Matsuno Sōfū 松野奏風 (1899-1963), were key players in the modern popularization of noh. The publisher for Kōgyo's prints, Matsuki Heikichi 松木平吉 of Daikokuya 大黒屋, sold them widely to the newly rich businessmen in Japan, but also aimed from the beginning for a foreign market. *Nohgaku hyakuban*, for instance, was originally sold three prints each in envelopes with both Japanese and English-language descriptions. Hence, not only Japanese museums but also major European and North American museums and universities have holdings of Kōgyo prints.

Several books about Japanese theatre written in English and German used Kōgyo's prints as illustrations. And even a Japanese TV drama director used a Kōgyo's print in a recently broadcast TV drama, "Story of my home" *Ore no ie no hanashi* 俺の家の話 (January 22 – March 26, 2021 on TBS). In the drama, "my home" is the head of a noh theatre school and this man, the father of the main character, uses a Kōgyo's print to explain a noh play [Sumidagawa 隅田川](#) to his grandson.

Kōgyo's noh prints are more than reproductions of what he saw and sketched in the theater. He tried to capture what he saw as the essence of a play, which led him to make additions, subtractions, and various other changes to the actual performance in his prints. He even went so far as to put his ideas of the real-life facial expressions of the characters he depicted on the masks the actors in his prints wore. And he added to his prints scenes and texts from the stories of the play that are not portrayed on stage. *Nōgaku zue* and *Nōgaku hyakuban* show this characteristic prominently.

Nōgaku zue was originally published in Tokyo during the late Meiji Era, 1897-1902. It comprises five volumes of 261 prints. Each volume is bound in the manner of traditional Japanese *orihon*, or folding scrolls. Some images include contextual details such as the architecture of the noh stage, the actors preparing backstage, or the spectators in the audience. Other images are more thematic and emphasize important props, attributes of the characters, symbolic decorative motifs, or excerpts of poetic texts printed as if written in elegant script. In one print, [Shōjō 猩々](#), Kogyo depicts an orangutan peeking from what is portrayed as a separate piece of paper; the orangutan does not appear on stage, but is mentioned in the text of the play. It is believed that Frederick Mortimer Clapp, first Chair of the History of Art Department at the University of Pittsburgh, purchased this rare set in the late 1920s with money provided by the steel heiress, Helen Clay Frick, as the first acquisition of our Kōgyo collection.

Nohgaku hyakuban was published in Tokyo in 1922-1926. It consists of 120 prints that graphically document 100 noh plays. In these prints, Kōgyo focused on the *shite*, the main actor, and for the most part, excluded other actors. Here, the character of the *shite* is drawn with even greater emphasis than in the *Nohgaku zue* prints. In one print, [Sanemori 実盛](#), the ghost of *Sanemori* even sits on the stairs at the front of the stage, where Noh actors customarily do not sit during a performance.

Nohga taikan was published in Tokyo during the early Shōwa Era 1925 and 1930. It comprises five volumes of 200 prints drawn by Kōgyo and his disciple, Matsuno Sōfū. Each print represents a scene from a noh play similar to how it appeared on stage. Of Kōgyo's three sets of

Noh prints, the *Nohga taikan* prints are thought to depict the plays more accurately than either *Nohgaku zue* or *Nohgaku hyakuban*. The prints do not reveal the names of the plays represented, but each print is preceded in its book by a piece of translucent paper on which the title of the play, the characters by type (*shite*, *waki*, *tsure*, *kyōgen*, *kokata*) and synopses in Japanese, are printed. We digitized these Japanese text pages and uploaded them with English summaries provided by P.G. O'Neill in his *A Guide to Nō* (Hinoki Shoten, 1964). The set was gifted to ULS by Professors Emeriti Richard and Mae Smethurst.

Kyōgen gojūban was published in Tokyo in 1927. It is an album of 50 prints inspired by kyōgen theatre, the comedic counterpart to noh, with prints produced by Kōgyo and his daughter, Gyokusei. The Pitt Library's *Kyōgen gojūban* is bound as one volume in folding album-format, which is the manner of traditional Japanese orihon, or folding scrolls.

The Pitt site contains a general biographical essay on the artist and a translation of an essay that Kōgyo wrote himself, published in 1914. On the first page of each set, you will find contextual essays for the whole set and links to Browse & Search the prints within the set.

You can also visit [our complete collection of Noh prints](#). This site contains 632 prints from four sets and 200 Japanese synopses with English summaries from *Nōga taikan*. In this site, you can search for various prints of the same play and compare them. Descriptions and metadata for each print, and O'Neill's English summaries help non-specialist and students understand more about prints and noh plays. For instance, you will find 8 prints and 4 synopses of *Soga-mono* when you search "Soga" by "anywhere in record" (default). *Soga-mono* means noh, bunraku and kabuki plays based on the tale of Soga brothers, which is the story of their avenging their father's death in 1193. Among Soga-mono prints, there is [Genpuku Soga 元服曾我](#), in which Gorō, a younger brother, has a ceremony which brings him to age as an adult so that he can help in the revenge. In [Kosode Soga 小袖曾我](#), the brothers dance for their mother before going off to fight their father's enemy. Then at [Yo'uchi Soga 夜討曾我](#), Gorō appears to kill their father's enemy in a night battle.

This digital collection is the product of years of collaborative work (please see Acknowledgements on [the home page](#)). But we are still working on several projects. 42 issues of *Fūzoku gahō* 風俗画報, which carries Kōgyo's illustrations, were recently gifted to ULS by Professors Emeriti Richard and Mae Smethurst. ULS also purchased [Nōgu taikan 能具大観 \(A Great Collection of Prints of Noh Props\)](#), which contain 100 color woodblock prints of noh props. They are under process of digitization.

We are also discussing with Prof. Ryō Akama of the Art Research Center of the Ritsumeikan University to add our entire Kōgyo collection to [their Ukiyo-e Portal Database](#). By adding our collection to Ritsumeikan's database, a larger audience can access our collection and we can receive more feedback from researchers and institutions.

In addition to the Kōgyo collection, Pitt also has the [Barry Rosensteel Japanese Prints Collection](#), which is an Ukiyo-e collection gifted by Mr. & Mrs. Rosensteel. Out of 275 prints in the collection, 116 prints depict kabuki theatre. Among them, there are 6 prints of *Soga-mono* include one of the actor [Ichikawa Ebizō V as Soga Gorō Tokimune](#) 曾我五郎時宗 五代目市川海老蔵. There are also prints of many other kabuki plays which derive from noh plays such as *Heike-mono*, *Hōgan-mono* (Yoshitsune), *Komachi-mono* (Ono no Komachi), *Shakkyō-mono*, etc. We are collecting these Ukiyo-e prints for building the Japanese Theatre Prints Collection at Pitt. We have now 632 prints in the Kōgyo collection, 100 prints of Noh Props, circa 40 illustrations in *Fūzoku gahō*, and 116 Kabuki prints in the Rosensteel collection. The total number of prints related to the Japanese theatre is still small, totaling only 888 prints, but the collection is becoming unique and useful to the study of Japanese theatre by focusing on this single theme.

The collection will continue to grow. In the meantime, we hope that the site can continue to be of use to students and researchers, or simply those wanting to browse virtually through reproductions of beautiful Japanese color woodblock prints.