

Remarks by Sumio Kusaka, Ambassador of Japan  
at the Opening Reception of the Exhibition “Melodrama in Meiji Japan”  
at the National Library of Australia

23 May 2017

I am delighted to be here with you this evening to celebrate the opening of this important exhibition, Melodrama in Meiji Japan.

As Japan’s Ambassador to Australia, I would like to express my gratitude to the National Library of Australia for bringing these beautiful works to the people of Australia.

We will shortly have an opportunity to see the exhibition up close, but may I say first that this collection of Japanese woodblock illustrations curated by Dr Gary Hickey is significant and, I believe, it is one of the finest in the world.

From the late 1880s *kuchi-e* were used to illustrate Japanese novels. These beautiful little images accompanied stories filled with drama, tragedy and intrigue.

The famous tradition of *ukiyo-e* wood block prints from the Edo period displayed realistic scenes of everyday life in Japan from the early 1700s. However after Japan’s Meiji government came to power in 1868, *ukiyo-e* prints gradually declined in popularity.

As the *ukiyo-e* prints became less fashionable, *kuchi-e* woodblock prints filled the void and were used widely in non-fiction novels as frontispieces, with the art and literature being both influenced by the west.

In fact, the sale of non-fiction novels depended heavily on the inclusion of *kuchi-e* illustrations, even though the cost of these works was very high compared to the cost of writing the novels.

The detail of these beautiful, intricate works is extraordinary. For Japanese people at that time, *kuchi-e* would have provided light, colour and entertainment in a period when there was no television or internet.

The illustrations provided a doorway for readers to step through and experience

the imaginary world of their novels. They gave readers wings to soar and explore the stories and adventures between the pages of each book.

Because the methods used to create *kuchi-e* were different from those used in *ukiyo-e*, they developed a new artistic style. To do so *kuchi-e* artists used techniques such as shading, shadow and perspective in a more realistic manner to create prints that looked like they had been painted with a brush.

One final interesting and important historical point.

*Kuchi-e* proves that traditional Japanese print art did not end in the Edo period. In fact, the skills involved in producing such high quality artistic work were evident up until the Taisho period. That followed the Meiji period, and lasted from 1912 to 1926, a year that Showa period started.

Further, *kuchi-e* subjects are also a window into the dramatic changes experienced by people during the Meiji period.

I was very pleased to learn as a Japanese diplomat that there have been a big increase number of *kuchi-e* collectors worldwide.

The NLA has one of the world's largest *kuchi-e* collections from the Meiji and the early Taisho period. This was made possible by a gift of more than 600 Japanese art works by the architect, landscape architect and educator, Professor Richard Clough from 2011 until his death in 2014.

I would also like to acknowledge Dr Gary Hickey, one of the main contributors to this exhibition, who was deeply involved with this collection in his role as valuer, advisor, researcher and finally as curator of this exhibition. It is the first of its kind at the library and indeed, at any Australian art gallery or museum.

It is my great pleasure that the one of the world's largest collections of *kuchi-e* woodblock prints, which has been preserved with extreme dedication, care and caution, will now be seen widely through this public exhibition.

It is a rare and special opportunity for many people to see, experience and understand this extraordinary and very beautiful Japanese art form.

The curators and staff from across the library have worked hard on this very fine exhibition and I would like to express my gratitude to you all.

I hope you enjoy tonight's preview of these beautiful works. They are as delightful today as the day they were created well over a century ago.

Thank you.