

30 May 2017

Dear friends,

I hope this email finds you well.

Please allow me to introduce a significant cultural exchange event between our two countries. On Tuesday 23 May, my wife, Ikuko and I attended the opening reception for the National Library of Australia's exhibition, *Melodrama in Meiji Japan*.

This exhibition features approximately 170 *kuchi-e* or woodblock illustrations that were used to illustrate Japanese novels and non-fiction visual media during the Meiji period and early Taisho period (late 1880s – early 1910s), around the time of Australia's federation in 1901. These illustrations provided a doorway for readers to step through and experience the imaginary world of the novels. The detail of these beautiful and intricate works is extraordinary. For Japanese people at the time, *kuchi-e* would have provided light, colour and entertainment in a period when there was no television or Internet.



(Left – with Dr Gary Hickey – Curator of the Exhibition, Right – *kuchi-e*)

As Japan progressed on the path of becoming a modern state in the latter half of the 19th Century, the technique behind woodblock illustrations developed greatly. This art form was influenced by the techniques and expressions of modern Western art yet remained reminiscent of the beautiful art techniques of *ukiyo-e* that flourished in the early 1700s of the Edo period, even during the national isolation period that lasted for more than 200 years. From viewing this exhibition, I could see how the unrivaled exquisiteness of

kuchi-e that is comparable with brush painting and the sophistication of Japan's high-technology expressed through its automobiles and robotics have something in common.



(Left - Delivering my opening remarks, Right - with Mr Ryan Stokes - Chairman of National Library of Australia, Dr Gary Hickey and Dr Marie-Louise Ayres -Director-General of National Library of Australia)

Between 2011 and 2014, Professor Richard Clough donated over 600 *kuchi-e* to the National Library of Australia, making it one of the largest collections in the world. Subsequently, more attention has been paid to the significant artistic value and authentic beauty of *kuchi-e* in modern Japanese art. With extreme dedication into the research, preservation and restoration of individual pieces, this exhibition was made possible making it the first of its kind in Australia. As Japan's Ambassador to Australia, I greatly appreciate the National Library of Australia for their professionalism and enthusiasm in providing this rare and special opportunity for many people to see this very beautiful Japanese art form. I would like to take this opportunity to once again express my sincere gratitude to the staff of the National Library of Australia as well as the Director-General, Dr. Marie-Louise Ayers and the curator of this exhibition, Dr. Gary Hickey.

Although this was my first time to appreciate *kuchi-e*, I could not help but be impressed and moved by the sophistication and high artistic quality of each of the *kuchi-e* where I was able to imagine the stories of the everyday lives of the people of that time. I cannot express how wonderful this artwork is with words or pictures. Seeing is believing. You too have the opportunity to see this exhibition, which will be held until August 28 at the National Library of Australia in Canberra. It would be my pleasure to hear your thoughts on this exhibition of *kuchi-e*, which are as delightful today as the day they were created well over a century ago.

(My speech at the opening reception can be viewed [here](#))

(Melodrama in Meiji Japan Exhibition at the National Library of Australia:

<https://www.nla.gov.au/meiji>)

Yours sincerely,

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Sumio Kusaka

Ambassador of Japan to Australia