

Bushido: Way of the Samurai

# Woodblock Print



**Utagawa KUNIYOSHI** (Japanese 1797-1861)  
*Ushiwaka overcoming Benkei at the Gojo Bridge* c.1839  
colour woodblock (triptych)  
(a-c) 37.5 x 76.9 cm (image) (overall)  
(a-c) 37.5 x 76.9 cm (sheet) (overall)  
Felton Bequest, 1909

## Ushiwaka overcoming Benkei at the Gojo Bridge

Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1797 -1861) was one of the masters of *ukiyo-e* – a style of wood block printing that flourished in Japan during the Edo period. The term *ukiyo-e* or 'pictures of the floating world' alluded to the Buddhist notion of impermanence, but also referred to the colourful world of actors, courtesans, sumo wrestlers and the folktales and landscape scenes depicted in the prints.

Wood block prints were designed to be sold at affordable prices to a wide audience. They were the result of collaboration between artist and publisher, who employed skilled carvers and printers. Each design was hand carved from wood - usually cherry - and a separate block was required for each colour in the print.

Utagawa Kuniyoshi was famous for his animated images of heroes from history and legend, but he also depicted beautiful women, kabuki actors, landscapes and comic scenes. His work demonstrated a sharp eye, a keen sense of humour, a fertile imagination and a gift for social satire. As colourful as the characters he depicted, Kuniyoshi himself sported a body full of tattoos, possibly leading the fashion for tattooing among the Edo townsmen in the 1820's and 1830's.

This triptych *Ushiwaka overcoming Benkei at the Gojo Bridge* illustrates an episode from the life of the popular hero Yoshitsune (1159-89), who was also known as *Ushiwaka-maru* (young ox). On one of his nightly outings from the temple where he was training, 12-year-old Yoshitsune encountered Benkei on the Gojo Bridge in Kyoto. Benkei, a wild giant of a man, had been told by a sword-smith that he could forge a magic sword from the tips and cutting edges of a thousand blades. He obtained the swords by attacking samurai warriors crossing the Gojo Bridge. One night he saw the young Ushiwaka approaching carrying what would be his one-thousandth sword. Benkei, confident of an easy victory, attacked him without delay. However, the young warrior's acrobatic skills and lightning quick sword succeeded in defeating Benkei, who in return pledged to become Yoshitsune's dedicated follower.

## Middle years activity

### うきよえ 浮世絵 Woodblock Print

1 Find the following information about this artwork.

1 ここは どこ<sup>1</sup>ですか。

2 いつ<sup>2</sup> つくられました<sup>3</sup>か。

3 だれ<sup>4</sup>が 作りましたか。



2 Imagine you are inside of the artwork. What would you see, hear and smell?  
How would you feel? Complete the table in Japanese.

see	hear	smell	feel

3 Choose the correct word from the box to complete the following information.

This style of art work is called \_\_\_\_\_. Wood block printing started around  
the \_\_\_\_\_. It became more popular in \_\_\_\_\_.

This artwork illustrates the story of \_\_\_\_\_ defeating Benkei on Gojo Bridge  
in \_\_\_\_\_. Yoshitsune, whose childhood name was Ushiwakamaru, is one of the most  
famous \_\_\_\_\_.

さむらい

16 せいき

よしつね

うきよえ  
浮世絵

えど  
江戸じだい

きょうと  
京都

1 where

2 when

3 was made (つくりました:made)

4 who