

DH Benelux 2026

Storytellers by Design Workshop

Kabuki

Performance, print culture and cultural representation

Background

Since the early Edo period (c. 1603), kabuki has been one of Japan's most enduring performance traditions. It is also a complex cultural system shaped by religion and gender politics, urban entertainment, social hierarchy, commercial publicity, archival practices, and changing historical interpretations.

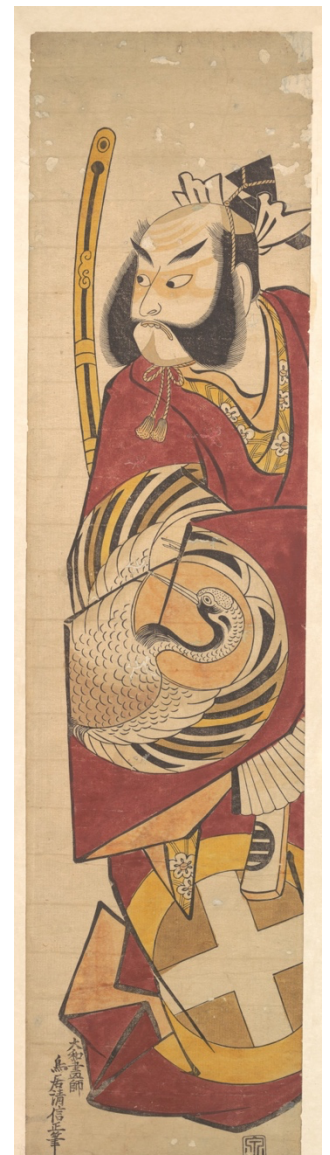
Often translated as “to be out of the ordinary,” kabuki emerged as a vibrant and experimental dance drama initiated by the shrine maiden Izumo no Okuni. Its popularity grew among female performers in tea houses and theatres. However, in 1629 the Edo shogunate barred women from performing, partly because of kabuki's association with prostitution. This gradually produced the all-male kabuki tradition, including the specialized role of onnagata, or male actors performing female roles.

Kabuki is also deeply tied to social and political history. In contrast to the more elite Noh theater tradition, kabuki evolved as urban entertainment for broader popular audiences. Its history reflects changing class relations, censorship, consumer culture, and the commercialization of leisure in early modern Japan.

Kabuki's performance history offers a rich basis for transmedia interpretation. The tradition has been preserved and circulated through scripts, playbooks, theatre programs, actor prints, costume and makeup, stage design, and music. At the time, these materials bridged performance, commerce, and popular taste. Today, they do not merely document the art form; they actively shape how kabuki is remembered, promoted, and interpreted.

For example, kabuki's popularity permeated the lively print economy of Edo Japan through actor prints and theatre playbills. These forms of visual ephemera reveal how celebrity was constructed and how productions were advertised, while also making theatrical roles legible to audiences.

At the same time, kabuki became one of the forms through which Japanese culture was later viewed, translated, stylized, and sometimes distorted in Western imaginaries. After Japan's borders opened, woodblock prints and other material traces of kabuki's performance tradition entered the collections of Western buyers and institutions. Kabuki prints are therefore a salient example for exploring representation, exoticism, and the reframing of cultural traditions as they move through museums, archives, and international collecting practices.



The Actor Bandō Hikosaburō 1st (?) by Torii Kiyonobu I (Japanese, 1664–1729) ca. 1725. Met Museum, Object Number JP650



Playbill for "Akiba gongen kaisen-banashi," "Futatsu chōchō kuruwa nikki" and "Godairiki koi no fūjime" performed at the Chikugo Theater in Osaka from the fifth month of Kaei 2 (May, 1849). <https://calisphere.org/item/1c26b425-97c3-42ba-8479-6cf2a6c45861/>

Case Study Dataset: UCLA Digital Collection of Woodblock Print Theatre Playbills

For this case study, the core dataset is the Kamigata Kabuki Banzuke collection held by the UCLA, Richard C. Rudolf East Asian Library. This archive consists of 101 bound sets of woodblock-print playbills and related materials from Kamigata theaters, documenting 125 kabuki plays performed between the late eighteenth and late nineteenth centuries. The collection is especially useful because it captures how kabuki was presented to audiences in its own time, through posters, cast lists, and illustrated scenes. It also offers multiple entry points for digital storytelling:

- performance and embodiment,
- gender and theatrical labor,
- costume, makeup, and staging,
- print culture and audience publicity,
- cultural translation and Western representation,
- or archival access and institutional framing

NOTE

The dataset is not a closed object, but an invitation to build a research-driven digital storytelling experience from a historical performance culture that is visually rich, culturally significant and ethically charged.

Additional Resources

Birk, Sara K., (2006). "Sex, androgyny, prostitution and the development of onnagata roles in Kabuki theatre" Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers. 3537. <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/3537>

Meech-Pekarik, Julia. (1982). [Early Collectors of Japanese Prints and The Metropolitan Museum of Art](#). The Metropolitan Museum of Art Journal, vol. 17, 93-118.

Saltzman-Li, K. (2010). Creating Kabuki Plays: Context for Kezairoku, "Valuable Notes on Playwriting." Brill: Leiden, Boston.

Youtube: [Kabuki - The People's Dramatic Art - Amanda Mattes](#)

Victoria and Albert Museum Digital Collection: Search results for [Kabuki, theatre](#)

Met Digital Collection: [Kabuki Actor Prints by 18th cent. artist Torii Kiyonobu I](#)

Met Digital Collection of a 19th cent. [Kotsuzumi \(小鼓\) Drum](#)

Met Digital Collection of a 19th cent. [Kabuki Costume](#)

Internet Archive: [Music from the Kabuki](#)

Smart History: [Kabuki Actor Prints by The British Museum](#)

Kabuki Official Website: [Guide to \(modern\) Kabuki](#)

National Geographic: [Kabuki and Noh are evolving with the times](#)