

## **Simplifying Stylistic Diversity in Contemporary Art:** *Japanese bird prints from 1950 to the present day*



## Introduction

Contemporary art is stylistically diverse because artists are expected to create works of art which show their individuality. To simplify diversity humans typically group items based on their similarities. This approach is taken here to simplify, and thereby help to understand, stylistic diversity in contemporary (i.e., 1950 to present day) Japanese bird prints. Since the 1950s birds have been the subject of more than three thousand art prints produced by more than four hundred Japanese artists. Grouping these prints by printmaking method and accuracy of depiction is a useful way of simplifying their stylistic differences.

Before 1950 a single printmaking method (ie. **woodblock** printing) was used to produce all Japanese bird prints. Since then four more printmaking methods (i.e., **intaglio**, **screenprint**, **lithograph**, **digital** printing) have been added. To make a **woodblock** print the picture design was first outlined on the surface of a piece of wood. Areas surrounding this outline were then chiseled away. Next, ink was applied to the outline, followed by a piece of paper, and the back of the paper was rubbed to transfer ink to paper. To create a multi-colored print the piece of paper was placed sequentially on a series of wooden blocks each carved and inked differently to show a particular portion of the design. **Intaglio** is an Italian word meaning to cut into. In intaglio printmaking the design was cut into a piece of metal and the cuts were filled with ink. A piece of paper was then pushed into the cuts using a mechanical press to transfer the ink to paper. Cuts could be made using a metal tool or acid or both to create different artistic effects. To make a **screenprint** a template of the design was first made using a screen, typically a piece of mesh fabric (e.g., silk, polyester) or less often a piece of porous paper, which was covered with a non-porous substance except in areas of the design. The template was then placed on top of a piece of paper and ink was applied. The ink only passed through areas of the screen not covered by the non-porous substance to reproduce the design on the paper below. For multi-colored prints multiple templates were made, one for each color. In **lithography** the design for a print was first drawn on the surface of a smooth slab of stone using a greasy substance that would readily absorb ink. Ink was then added and a piece of paper was placed on top of the inked surface. Finally, pressure was applied using a mechanical press to transfer the ink to paper. To make a multi-colored print this process was repeated using a different stone slab for each ink color. In **digital** printmaking the design was first created using a drawing program that was written for the digital computer. This design was then

sent electronically to a mechanical printing device which made a paper copy of the digital design by adding ink to paper. If the same design was printed using all five of these printmaking techniques the resulting prints would be noticeably different. The woodblock printed design would appear to be relatively coarse because the chisel is not a tool capable of creating fine detail. Intaglio prints, in contrast, typically show finer detail and color variation. Screenprinted objects have the sharpest edges. Screenprinting is also capable of showing very gradual color gradation if ink is dragged slowly from one side of the design to the other. Lithographic prints have characteristics most similar to paintings because the artist can apply 'brushstrokes' directly to the stone just as a painter would use a brush to apply paint to a canvas. The level of fine detail and clarity shown in digital prints would be difficult to achieve using any of the other printing methods.

The accuracy with which Japanese artists drew birds also changed noticeably starting in the 1950s. Before 1950 birds were drawn either objectively (i.e., accurate shape and colors) or semi-objectively (i.e., semi-accurate shape and [or] color). After 1950 birds were also drawn subjectively (i.e., intentionally inaccurate shape and color) to express the artist's personal view about the bird subject depicted. Subjective depiction plus the additional four methods of printmaking were western (i.e. European, American) inventions which Japanese printmakers adopted in the 1950s when they became part of an international community of printmakers.

This virtual exhibition includes examples of fifteen categories (i.e., five printmaking methods x three levels of depiction accuracy) of contemporary Japanese bird prints. Examples were chosen from the Reader Collection of Japanese Art which includes more than one thousand contemporary Japanese bird prints. Examples are arranged first by printmaking method and second by accuracy of depiction within each of the printmaking methods.

### Additional Reading

Johnson, Margaret K. and Hilton, Dale K. 1980. *Japanese Prints Today*. Shufunotomo Co. Ltd., Tokyo.  
Smith, L. 1985. *Contemporary Japanese Prints: Symbols of a Society in Transition*. British Museum Publications Ltd., London.

**Objective woodblock print**

Crested ibis (*Nippon nipponia*) by  
Hideaki Tatehori, entitled crested  
ibis taking off, 265 x 335 mm



29/50

HIDEAKI TATEHORI

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**Semi-objective woodblock print**

Crane (*Grus* sp.) by Hiroshi Tomihari, entitled distant mountain, 395 x 300 mm

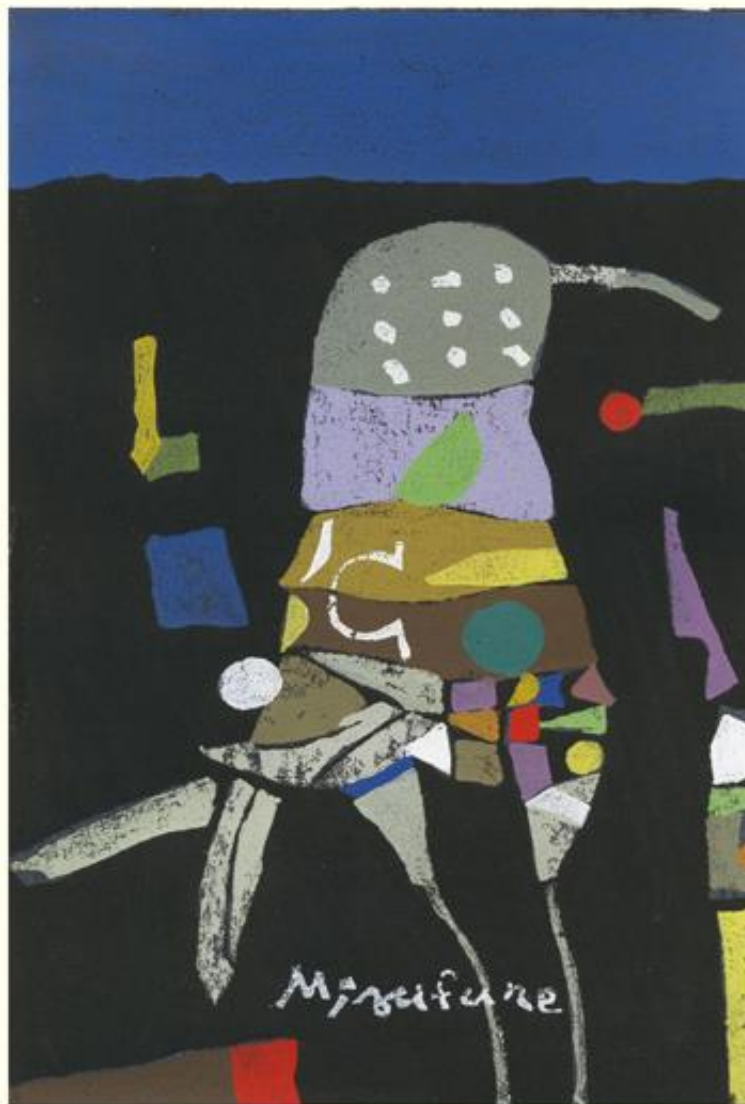


遠山 (トミハリ)

H. Tomihari 2004

**Subjective woodblock print**

Unidentified bird by Rokushū  
Mizufune, entitled night visitor,  
215 x 280 mm



R. Mizufune 12 9 2 10/50

**Objective intaglio print**

Common kingfisher (*Alcedo atthis*) by Mitsuru Nagashima, entitled lakeside, 345 x 340 mm



**Semi-objective intaglio print**

Ural owl (*Strix uralensis*) by  
Tomiko Matsuno, 210 x 250  
mm



4/50

Tomiko Matsuno



## Subjective intaglio print

Peafowl (*Pavo* sp.) by Kenji  
Ushiku, entitled bird and tree  
leaves, 195 x 280 mm



-木がはとこり- 32/200 10-ushiku

**Objective screenprint**

Red-crowned crane (*Grus japonensis*) by Takeo Honma, entitled dawn, 380 x 270 mm



25/200

あけほの

T. Honma

**Semi-objective screenprint**

Domestic fowl (*Gallus gallus*) by  
Taeko Takebe, 270 x 265 mm



**Subjective screenprint**

Unidentified bird by Ay-Ō Iijima, 250 x 175 mm



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**Objective lithograph**

Blue-and-white flycatcher (*Cyanoptila cyanomelana*) by Yoshiki Nonouchi, entitled shade prize, 525 x 420 mm



Nonouchi

Nonouchi  
Yoshiki



**Semi-objective lithograph**

Mandarin duck (*Aix galericulata*) by Tatsuoki Ichino, entitled mandarin duck, 330 x 260 mm



**Subjective lithograph**

Owl (*Otus* sp.) by Hiroaki  
Yoshioka, entitled owl A, 455 x  
635 mm



**Objective digital print**

Common kingfisher (*Alcedo atthis*) by Masahiro Tabuki, entitled kingfishers, 320 x 235 mm



Kingfishers

M. Tabuki



**Semi-objective digital print**

Ural owl (*Strix uralensis*) by Hiromitsu Sakai, 425 x 295 mm

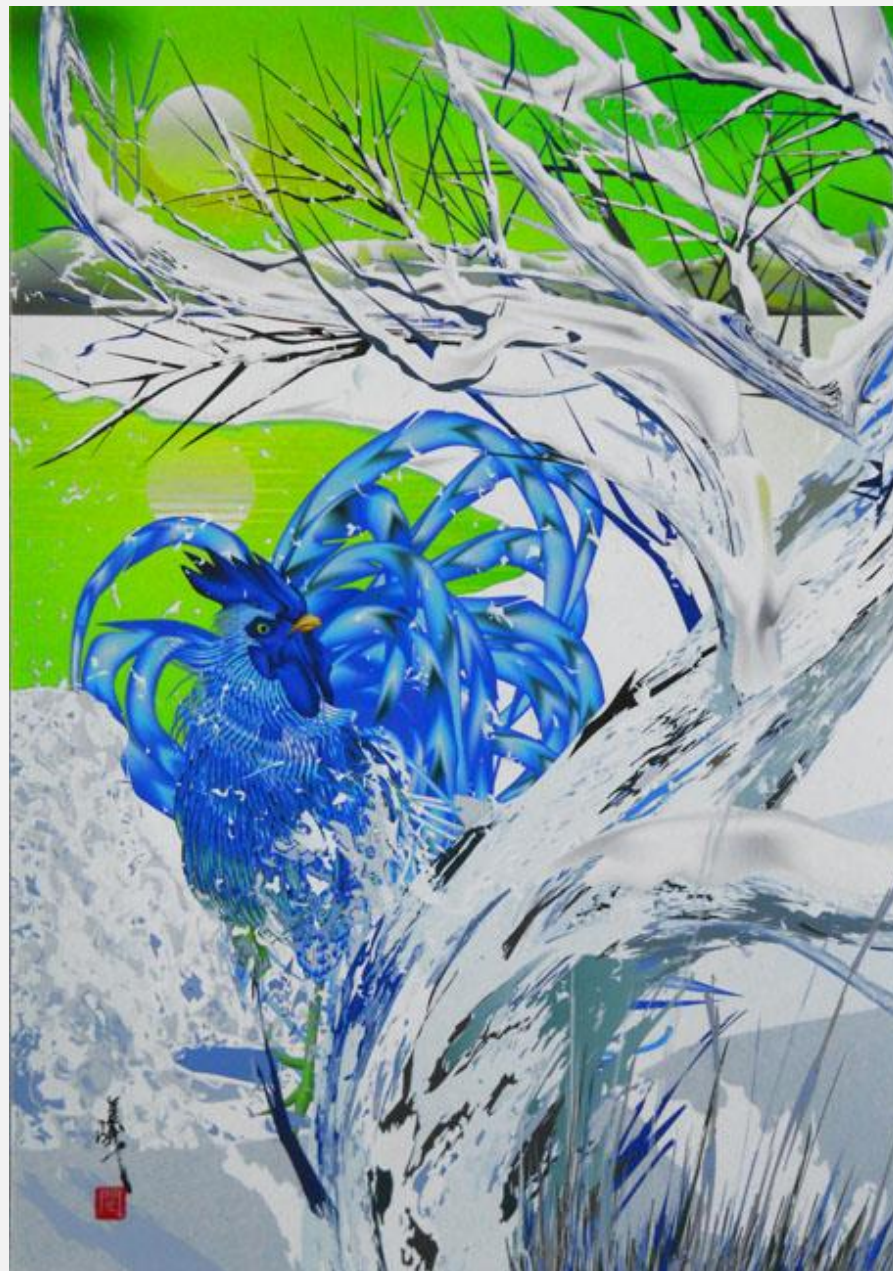


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Hiromitsu

**Subjective digital print**

Domestic fowl (*Gallus gallus*) by  
Masahiko Saga, 300 x 420 mm



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