Interesting Owls in contemporary Japanese art

Scops owl (Otus sp.) by Yoshiharu Kimura
Introduction

The printed art of Japan has included pictures of birds for about three hundred years. During this period the popularity of owls as subjects for printed art has increased dramatically, as shown below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>60-year interval</th>
<th>1710-1769</th>
<th>1770-1829</th>
<th>1830-1889</th>
<th>1890-1949</th>
<th>1950-2009</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>number of artists drawing owls</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>100</td>
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A likely reason for the dramatic increase in the popularity of owls as subjects for art in the last sixty years is the change in their symbolic association. Since the 1950s owls have been considered to be symbols of good luck and protection from hardship. These associations are based on similarities between a Japanese name for owls (i.e., fukurō) and the words for luck (fuku) and no (fu) hardship (kurō). Before 1950 the negative Chinese association of owls with ingratitude (because owl offspring were thought to eat their parents) was also prevalent in Japan.

The two types of owls depicted most often in post-1950s Japanese art are scops owls (*Otus scops* and *Otus lettia*) and the Ural owl (*Strix uralensis*). Scops owls have prominent ear tufts while Ural owls do not. In real life neither owl is particularly eye-catching (pictures 1 and 2). Presumably their dull colors allow them to blend into the background and hide from both their prey and predators. To make these owls more interesting many Japanese artists changed their colors and (or) shape. This virtual exhibition includes thirty examples of these more interesting owls. The examples were chosen from the Reader Collection of Japanese Art which includes several hundred post-1950 owl prints. Owls with prominent ear tufts, presumably modeled on scops owls, are shown in prints 1-15 and owls without ear tufts, presumably modeled on the Ural owl, are shown in prints 16-30. For each print the following information is provided: names of the owl model and the artist, printing method, title and print size.
1. Scops owl by Gashū Fukami, woodblock print entitled surrounded in green, 220 x 295 mm

2. Scops owl by George Ueda, screenprint entitled collared scops owl – older brother, 125 x 165 mm
3 Scops owl by Morikazu Maeda, woodblock print, 150 x 125 mm

4 Scops owl by Fumio Kitaoka, woodblock print, 150 x 125 mm
5  Scops owl by Hiroaki Yoshioka, lithograph, 455 x 635 mm

6  Scops owl by Shiko Munakata, woodblock print, 260 x 390 mm
7 Scops owl by Motoi Ōi, screenprint, 380 x 455 mm

8 Scops owl by Hiroshi Kabe, screenprint entitled owl III, 155 x 200 mm
9 Scops owl by Nobuyoshi Koga, screenprint entitled March 3, 105 x 150 mm

10 Scops owl by Keisuke Ohba, screenprint entitled love, 105 x 150 mm
11  Scops owl by Kaoru Kawano, woodblock print, 285 x 430 mm

12  Scops owl by Iwao Akiyama, woodblock print entitled can’t sleep, 360 x 460 mm
13 Scops owl by **Masao Ohba**, screenprint entitled owl IV, 135 x 195 mm

14 Scops owl by **Minoru Yokota**, intaglio print, 190 x 250 mm
15 Scops owl by Masasuke Chiba, screenprint entitled autumn, 300 x 600 mm

16 Ural owl by Kichiemon Okamura, stencil print, 415 x 555 mm
17 Ural owl by Ayaka Sen, screenprint entitled Midas touch, 200 x 275 mm

18 Ural owl by Kan Kozaki, woodblock print, 220 x 320 mm
19  Ural owl by **Fumiaki Fukita**, woodblock print entitled many days child sitting, 605 x 470 mm

20  Ural owl by **Hiromitsu Sakai**, digital print, 425 x 295 mm
21 Ural owl by Keisaburō Tejima, woodblock print entitled 'owl’s wood', 300 x 380 mm

22 Ural owl by Tomikichirō Tokuriki, woodblock print, 250 x 350 mm
23 Ural owl by Kōhō Ōuchi, woodblock print entitled spring dance, 245 x 245 mm

24 Ural owl by Ray Morimura, woodblock print, 180 x 195 mm
25 Ural owl by **Ryōnosuke Shimomura**, intaglio print entitled OYAT, 240 x 265 mm

26 Ural owl by **Masaki Shibuya**, woodblock print entitled kung fu forest No. 7, 120 x 135 mm
27 Ural owl by Yoshiharu Kimura, woodblock print entitled saint B, 335 x 375 mm

28 Ural owl by Rokushū Mizufune, woodblock print entitled lonely wisdom, 215 x 285 mm
29  Ural owl by Kōzō Onishi, woodblock print, 125 x 110 mm

30  Ural owl by Tomiko Matsuno, intaglio print, 210 x 250 mm