

Sumo Art - A World Of Its Own

by *Chris Gould*

It towers over us at Ryogoku station, welcomes us in the Kokugikan entrance hall, overhangs us in the Kokugikan arena and adorns the backs of our English-language matchday programmes. Sumo art is everywhere, but what is the story behind it? Chris Gould investigates.

Introduction

On the sixth day of the Natsu Basho 2007, my viewing companion – the esteemed Yoko-san – lost enthusiasm for the bout between the uninspiring Ushiomaru and the troubled Tosanoumi.

'Let's go outside,' she said. "Very nice picture. You'll see." She referred, of course, to the large displays of artwork either side of the main Kokugikan entrance.



Lynn Matsuoka

In January 2007, the Sumo Association (NSK) had chosen to decorate this entrance with giant photographs of the tournament favourites: Asashoryu and Hakuho. In May, however, I soon

discovered that the NSK had plumped for something more traditional. As Yoko-san and I departed the entrance hall, we were confronted with a blown-up reproduction of an ukiyo-e (woodblock print). The image depicted a grapple between two

1185AD). Among the earliest pieces of art unearthed are the Englishiki dolls, immaculately carved from wood during this era. The spectacular handiwork deployed on the dolls not only allows for fully-fledged mage, but the depiction of a belt-battle, with



Hiroko Komatsu

highly rotund wrestlers and bore all the hallmarks of an Edo-period print. The wrestlers' outlines were dark and thick; their legs and arms sharply defined. The expressions on their faces were vacant, with the artist having concentrated far more on conveying their physical strength. The picture was, quite literally, a colourful illustration of how sumo has persistently inspired artists throughout the centuries.

Wooden art: From carved figures to ukiyo-e

Although haniwa (clay figures) of wrestlers can be dated back to the 3rd century AD, figurines did not assume an essentially sumo form until the Heian period (894AD-

each carved wrestler gripping the other's sash, thighs tensed and back bent appropriately.

The Heian period also saw the proliferation of the sumo scroll painting, including that of the (alleged) inaugural sumo bout between Nominosukune and Taimanokehaya. The scroll certainly emanates the artist's respect for the Nihongi, the Chronicles of Japan compiled in 720AD, which made reference to the bout. It should be noted though, that since the production of the scroll, the existence of the bout has been hotly disputed, not least because it was 'performed' before an Emperor widely dismissed by historians as himself

'legendary.'

From their Heian origins, scroll paintings were the principle means of depicting sumo until the early Edo period (1603-1867). As with *Nominosukune versus Taimanokehaya*, scrolls were particularly called upon to depict popular sumo myths, including the day when Otomonoyoshio allegedly secured the imperial throne for Korehito by felling Kinonatora – aided, it should be added, by the prayers of a Buddhist priest.



Hiroko Komatsu

The supremacy of scroll pictures was challenged from the 1620s by the advent of ukiyo-e (the woodblock print). The literal translation of ukiyo-e ('picture of the floating world') refers to the type of urban environment in which it was conceived, an environment in which artisans and intellectuals tried to free themselves from the chains of convention. In such a spirit did these artists dare to question political events, and relentlessly publicize the controversial play *Chushingura*, thus helping it become arguably the most famous kabuki work in Japanese history.

With sumo based in the same city

centres as the urban 'free-thinkers' (namely Edo (modern Tokyo), Kyoto and Osaka), it is unsurprising that the sport found itself – along with kabuki actors – as the subject of ukiyo-e. Significantly, ukiyo-e were tailor-made for the rank-and-file sumo follower, who could not afford a full painting of a sumotori and craved a cheaper, mass-produced alternative. Mass production was achieved in the following manner: the original ink drawing would be glued face-down to a wooden-block, which would in turn be

inked (sometimes in a variety of colours) and used for printing numerous pictures. In the 18th and 19th centuries, ukiyo-e printers commissioned sumo themes from artists, safe in the knowledge that they would be devoured by the sumo masses. Customers from outside the cities were attracted by prints which depicted the outcome of important torikumi and, from 1757, copies of the *banzuke*.

Although occasionally used to portray sumo legends, ukiyo-e focused attention on the life of the urban classes, and sought to convey the feel of 'a day at the sumo.' As a result, images of

grappling sumotori surrounded by rowdy crowds in outdoor stadia (much like the image shown to me by Yoko-san) proliferated. As European techniques began to permeate Japanese artistry, ukiyo-e began to introduce perspective, so that far away objects (i.e. the rear of the stadium) looked narrower than those objects closer-up, such as the *dohyo*. Perhaps more interestingly, ukiyo-e were used not only to explore the human side of a sumo event but the human form of the sumotori themselves. One picture, for example, shows *Tanikaze* – a super-human figure in sumo circles – engaged in the most human of activities: smoking a pipe.

It was during *Tanikaze's* late-eighteenth-century heyday that the popularity of sumo ukiyo-e skyrocketed, as fans craved prints of the Big Three: *Tanikaze*, *Raiden* and *Onogawa*. However, the finest sumo prints were not published until the 19th century; a time when four members of the *Utagawa* family dominated the business for over sixty years.

The rise of the portrait on canvas

After the Meiji reforms exposed Japan to more European influences, wooden-block portraits of sumotori gained competition from oil-on-canvas artists. Many fine oil works can be witnessed around Tokyo's sumo quarter today, not least the giant portraits overlooking ticket barriers at Ryogoku's JR Station. Within the *Kokugikan* itself, of course, hang the portraits of the 32 previous *yusho* winners, each of which is commissioned by the *Mainichi Newspaper* (and smaller versions of which can usually be found in the stable associated with the relevant wrestler). Of slight concern is the fact that the artist responsible for the portraits, *Suzue Sato*, is now very old and has not, to common knowledge,

trained a successor.

In 1973, a young artist named Lynn Matsuoka embarked upon a journey that would lead to her being dubbed 'the Degas of Sumo.' Edgar Degas (1834-1917), was loosely described as an 'Impressionist,' who – later on in his career – became renowned for vivid colours and bold brush-strokes, principally working with oil on canvas. Appropriately enough, some of his work was influenced by his personal collection of ukiyo-e. Matsuoka's signature style is oil and graphite. Despite her toning down of vivid colours, her focus on body, form and facial expression is unmistakably Degas-like.



Lynn Matsuoka

Matsuoka's emphasis on the oicho-mage is particularly evident as she takes full advantage of the nigh-unrivalled proximity to the sumotori afforded to her. As her [website](#) shows, she has even ventured into the field of ukiyo-e.

Fifteen years after Matsuoka's first works appeared, the spread of sumo to European television screens attracted another generation of artists. Among them were the French sculptor Maurice

Guillaume (who has carved sumo figurines) and Charles Willmott, an oil-on-canvas specialist from the UK.

Speaking in 2005, Willmott described his captivation by sumo as follows: 'I was looking for a sporting subject to paint. As a figurative realist working in a fairly conventional oil-on-canvas medium, it was important that the subject and method were sympathetic with one another in "fine art" terms. [With sumo], there was just something right about the whole thing. I really got hooked at the first simple encounter.'

When asked to elucidate his

motivations in a fine-art catalogue, Willmott wrote: 'A glimpse into the past reveals a fascinating world, filled with tragedy and triumph, where beautiful ceremonies reflect an ancient harmony. This bygone culture was my inspiration and I am captivated by the magic of its spell.' Willmott's preoccupation with the ceremonial aspect of sumo is evident in his most famous work: *Gyoji in Blue*, which reveals an orange-tassled sanyaku gyoji in his

full costumed splendour.

In the present day, an alternative, and oftentimes comic, approach to sumo is taken by rising Japanese artist Hiroko Komatsu (interview to appear on September 15th). Generally preoccupied with personality at the expense of background, Komatsu appears intent on highlighting the human failings of sumotori, regularly capturing them in odd poses. A more serious message clearly pervades her apparent light-heartedness as she inventively explores the threats to sumotori health: injury (falling in a compromising position), chronic fatigue and exhaustion (napping with a dog) and obesity (jostling for space in a bath-tub).

Other sumo art-forms

As Ryan Laughton has already revealed in his articles, the 1940s saw the proliferation of sumo menko – pieces of cardboard or thick paper bearing pictures of rikishi. Hand-drawn in the 1930s, the rikishi gracing menko cards subsequently appeared in bromide form (with photographic resemblance) and also gold-proof form. However, the excitement that greeted moving pictures on television dramatically reduced the appeal of menko in the mid-1960s.

Sumo continues to attach importance to the sculpture. The main road bisecting the Kokugikan and the Pearl Hotel hosts an array of mini sculptures of yokozuna, replete with tsuna and in Shiranui or Unryu poses. Each sculpture is perched on a hexagonal base which displays bronze handprints of former grand champions. A larger sculpture of an ebullient Shiranui yokozuna can be found in a glass case at the main entrance / exit of the Kokugikan's sumo museum, while a more famous stone sculpture of two sumotori in

mid-bout is situated near the approach to the dohyo at the rear of Yasukuni Shrine.

Another impressive form of sumo artwork is the sensu, or paper fan. [Daimon-san](#) of Hakuho-loving fame is currently one of sumo's leading sensu artists, and frequently attends the Kokugikan to sell his work in person. His sensu invariably consist of the leading sumotori of the day, draped in their haori and with faces in Edo ukiyo-e form. Daimon-san's talents also extend to e-banzuke, which chart the career of a particular sumotori (e.g. Chiyonofuji) in picture form. The sumotori is drawn as a skinny novice at the beginning of the chart and gradually morphs into a chunkier and older version of himself come retirement day.



Lynn Matsuoka