A Rare Exhibition of Torii Masters

“The Theatrical Prints of the Torii Masters,” a traveling exhibition at the Honolulu Academy of Arts from August 4 through September 3, marks several new stages in the study of Japanese wood-block prints. It is an example of a new movement of international cooperation between museums and private collectors, often secretive and defensive in the past. Howard A. Link has been able to gather around the Academy and the James A. Michener collections — of which he is curator — rare materials from Japan, the United States, and Switzerland.

Link’s scholarly catalogue demonstrates how such materials can be used to achieve greater historical accuracy and precision of analysis than has been customary in the field. He goes back to the earliest stages of the art and studies them in the context of a broad range of contemporaneous evidence: historical documents uncovered by his research, religious art, military storybooks, and so on. His pioneering study of play bills and kabuki storybooks — printed for the opening night performance and illustrating the scenes and poses predicted to become the most popular — enables him to identify and date broadsheets exactly. He applies methods developed in studies of Western art to describe styles, relate prints, and appreciate each individually.

Moreover, Link goes beyond the purely visual arts. He sets the mood of the Edo period: a new military rule with a new capital full of warriors and adventurous businessmen. The soft, exquisite art of the old capital, Kyoto, begins to recede before one which better seizes the spirit of the times. In the streets, popular storytellers chant the tall-tale exploits of legendary strong men while puppets swagger and gesture extravagantly.

The great kabuki actor Danjuro, trained in the soft style of Kyoto, comes to Edo and, in 1697, creates a new style of acting, for which he borrows the make-up and gestures of the puppet theatre. An illustrated storybook is prepared for opening night. Most of the prints are in the calm style used previously for the kabuki of Kyoto. But some are in a new, furiously dynamic style appropriate to the acting Danjuro will debut.

After laying this broad foundation, Link is able to distinguish between two early Torii artists whose works and even identities have been confused. Kiyonobu, the better known, is primarily the artist of a softer style. Kiyomasu is established as the creator of the dynamic new one. These two styles — the one calm and conservative, the other agitated and adventurous — become the poles between which later wood-block artists oscillate.

Link is able to isolate four seminal prints within the work of Kiyomasu — large broadsheets printed between 1697 and 1703 and re-
assembled here for the first time.

In these prints—which form a high point in Kiyomasu's work and in the whole wood-block tradition—the artist is working at the peak of his creativity. His figures fill the paper, pressing at the margins and bursting out at the viewer. The images retain the traditional linearity of the medium, but take on a new three-dimensionality inspired by the kabuki pose of the actual actor on the stage. That pose freezes for contemplation an action of intense energy.

Later artists adopted the gourd shape, inspired by leggings, used to depict the straining muscles of the legs, and the wriggling lines quivering with tension. But Kiyomasu's art transcends codifiable devices. As in Cezanne's paintings, the whole visual universe of the print twists with its point: the violent swing of the body at its hip, the spiral swirl of counterpointed figures.

The artist seems to be exploring the possibilities of his compositions. The four prints divide into two informal pairs, the early one of single figures, the later of double. Each print is an almost mirror image of the one with which it is paired, as if the artist had drawn one and waited for it to be printed—thus reversing the image—before he drew the other.

In his exploration, Kiyomasu traced the route later followed by the famous Sharaku: single figures to double ones and later to whole scenes with backdrops. As with Sharaku's work, we Westerners are drawn to the earliest stages in which we sense the primal burst of creative energy.

I myself would see the first essay in the undated Kintoki Wrestling with a Black Bear, more vibrant and less perfected than the portrait of Danjuro in the 1697 play. Looking at the print, I am reminded of the perpetual pendulum movement of Japanese art between its native barbarism and the cultivated refinements it imported from China. Kabuki and wood-block prints were symptoms of a resurgence of the genuine Japanese spirit. Print-makers signed their works proudly “An Artist of Japan.”

Kiyomasu in this first large-scale print in his new style shows us what strength he acquired wrestling with his Japanese soul after its long hibernation.