



JAPAN INFORMATION
AND CULTURE CENTER
在米国日本大使館広報文化センター

TEACHING TUESDAY

UTSUSHI-E

100 years before the beginning of cinema, Japanese were entertained by their own colorful moving pictures, utsushi-e (写し絵). It all started when Danish magic lantern dealer and comic story teller Kameya Toraku decided to combine his passions and make a new art form. Utilizing the magic lantern and Asian shadow and puppet theater, he designed a new projector, called a furo, which were made of wood, allowing operators to carry them behind the screen. He also took hints from the way operators controlled puppets in bunraku, he created a system of hand painted slides that could be manipulated by sliding glasses or using mechanisms often driven with threads.

The productions themselves were quite elaborate. Utsushi-e were known for their intricate drawings, vivid color, and novel animation techniques accompanied with traditional music which enchanted the audience. Utsushi-e performances were typically traditional Japanese stories and legends, occasionally combined with newer small side shows. Ghost stories were especially popular, particularly during the summer months. The narration was similar to that of kabuki or bunraku, with a shamisen player and a narrator sitting to the side.

But they were also able to achieve techniques such as fade in/fade out, cut in/cut out, overlap, and zoom through a combination of glass and wooden masks, use of threads, and collaboration between multiple operators. The furo, or projector which was based on the magic lantern, was also used for producing tricks. A piece of black textile as in this picture can be used to a quick appearance/disappearance of images, as well as for special effects such as lightings. The ability of the operators of the furo to move around also allowed the images to change location and size.

Utsushi-e almost completely disappeared with the rise of movies, but there has been a movement recently to revitalize and preserve this old traditional art form. Rediscovered in the late 1970's and reintroduced to the public in the early 1990's, utsushi-e today is mostly practiced by the Tokyo-based performance art troupe Minwa-za.