



REFERENCE MATERIAL · THE ADACHI UKIYOE AWARD 2026

The Role of the Eshi in Ukiyo-e

How Did Hokusai's The Great Wave off Kanagawa Take Shape?

Ukiyo-e was never the work of one pair of hands. The publisher conceived the project, the eshi drew the image, and the carver and printer transformed it into a woodcut. Using Hokusai's The Great Wave off Kanagawa as an example, this guide explains the role of the eshi in ukiyo-e production and how a single print was created through this division of labor.

The Role of the Eshi in Ukiyo-e Production

Katsushika Hokusai's The Great Wave off Kanagawa is one of the world's best-known ukiyo-e prints. Familiar as "The Great Wave," it continues to appear in contemporary design and to inspire new forms of expression. Yet the print as we know it was not the work of Hokusai alone. It was made possible by the sophisticated division of labor and woodcut techniques shared by the publisher, eshi, carver, and printer.

Ukiyo-e prints of the Edo period were mass-produced and published so that ordinary people could afford and enjoy them. The publisher directed the entire production process, devising the project, selecting an eshi, and commissioning the design. The eshi drew the image in response to the subject and intent of the commission. The carver then cut the design into woodblocks, and the printer applied the colors one by one to washi to complete the print.

What Did the Eshi Draw?

Working from the subject and concept commissioned by the publisher, the eshi developed the composition, the movement of figures and motifs, and the expressive character of the image. The eshi did not, however, usually create a fully colored picture showing exactly how the finished print would look. What the eshi handed to the carver was a *hanshita-e*: a drawing in black ink that defined the principal outlines of the image. This served as the basis for the key block.

The *hanshita-e* that Hokusai drew for *The Great Wave off Kanagawa* likewise consisted primarily of outlines. The carver pasted the drawing directly onto the block and first carved the key block, which would print the principal outlines. Once the key block was finished, a proof impression known as a *kyogo-zuri* was pulled, and Hokusai added color instructions to it. Based on those instructions, the color blocks were carved. When all the blocks were ready, the publisher and eshi visited the printer for trial printing. Hokusai also gave the printer verbal instructions about the colors. Once a model impression had been finalized, the printer used it as a guide to print the first batch for sale, often around 200 impressions.

The publisher set the project in motion; the eshi created its visual core. That image then passed through the hands, judgment, and skill of the artisans to become an ukiyo-e print.

The Carver Reads the Eshi's Lines

The *hanshita-e* was pasted face down directly onto a block. Using a *kogatana*, a fine knife with an exceptionally sharp edge, the carver cut along both sides of the lines drawn by the eshi. Chisels, or *nomi*, were then used to clear away the surrounding wood, leaving only the areas that would print in relief.

Because the *hanshita-e* was pasted to the block, it disappeared as the block was carved. Whether the delicacy, tension, and rhythm of the eshi's brushwork survived on the block depended on the carver's ability to read those lines and re-create them in wood.



Carving the key block for Hokusai's *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*. The outlines are carved with a *kogatana*.

A Contemporary Carver on Hokusai's Line

Niimi, a carver at The Adachi Institute of Woodcut Prints with more than fifty years of experience and a veteran of many Hokusai reproductions, explains the particular demands of Hokusai's lines:

*Hokusai is said to have trained as a carver when he was young, and his drawings contain more intricate detail than those of many other artists. The lines of the waves in *The Great Wave off Kanagawa* are especially unforgiving. They sustain the power of the entire composition, so carving them requires intense concentration.*

— Niimi, carver



Veteran carver Niimi has worked on reproductions of many works by Hokusai.

The swelling, varied lines of the wave crests are very difficult. Simply copying their shape is not enough to create movement. I consider the rhythm of each line and the balance of the whole image as I guide the knife, so that Hokusai's lines remain alive.

— Niimi, carver

The Printer Creates Color, Depth, and Atmosphere

Once the woodblocks had been carved, the printer applied pigments to them and transferred each color to washi. The paper was aligned against registration marks called kento so that every impression would fall precisely into place. Because of their rich colors, full-color ukiyo-e were known as nishiki-e—"brocade pictures."

The printer mixed colors while sharing an understanding of the intended result with the publisher and eshi, and used a baren to work the pigments evenly into the fibers of the washi. Printers also employed techniques

unique to printing, such as bokashi (gradation) and karazuri (blind embossing), to bring the eshi's image to life as a woodcut. In addition, the demands of mass production required speed and the ability to reproduce the same quality consistently. This combination of highly refined technique, speed, and consistency made it possible to produce ukiyo-e in large numbers.



Printing Hokusai's *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*. The washi is aligned against the kento registration marks as the colors are printed one by one.

How Blue Shapes The Great Wave

Blue is essential to the force and spatial depth of *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*. Along with a subdued traditional indigo used in the outlines, the print employs Prussian blue, a synthetic pigment imported from Europe in the late Edo period. Its vivid color was unlike earlier Japanese pigments and became especially popular in the landscapes of Hokusai and Hiroshige.

The use of this fashionable color also shows how attentive eshi were to the visual culture and tastes of their time. Working within the publisher's concept, they created fresh images that appealed to the public and shared their ideas about color with the printer, who developed them into the final printed effects.

A Contemporary Printer on Hokusai's Blue

Kyoso, a printer at The Adachi Institute of Woodcut Prints, pays particular attention to color mixing and to achieving clear, even color when printing *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*:

*Working the pigment into the fibers of the washi is crucial. Hosho is a strong paper, so the printer must apply firm pressure with the baren to produce a clear color. In *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*, the balance between lighter and darker blues creates the three-dimensional form of the waves, which*

makes color mixing especially important.

— Kyoso, printer



Printer Kyoso works on both ukiyo-e reproductions and woodcuts created with contemporary artists.

The Eshi—Artist and Collaborator

The Great Wave off Kanagawa shows clearly that the eshi's work was never something completed in isolation. In response to the publisher's commission, Hokusai created the daring composition, the surging movement of the waves, the contrast between human vulnerability and the distant stillness of Mt. Fuji, and the lines that give the image its extraordinary tension. Yet for that conception to gain its full force as a woodcut, the carver's handling of line and the printer's handling of color were indispensable.

For this reason, an eshi needed more than the ability to draw an attractive picture. The design required lines that would come alive through carving, a composition that could be developed across woodblocks, and a clear image that could be shared with the artisans and developed through dialogue. The eshi draws the image; the carver and printer bring it to life in wood and on washi.

This collaborative system remains central to Adachi's work today. Contemporary eshi work in dialogue with carvers and printers, seeing how their images change and expand through materials such as cherry wood, pigment, and washi. Through that exchange, a woodcut emerges that none of the participants could have created alone.

A Past Award Collaboration: From Design to Woodcut

A collaboration with Ryohei Shimazaki, winner of the 7th Adachi Contemporary Ukiyo-e Award (2015), offers one example. In response to the Award theme, “Beautiful Men and Women,” Shimazaki created a contemporary bijin-ga in delicate lines. Alongside the expressive qualities of the figure and line, the design included fine decorative elements that could be further developed through carving and printing.



Ryohei Shimazaki's color design and line drawing for the 7th Adachi Contemporary Ukiyo-e Award.

The carver transferred the design to cherry wood and first carved the key block, which prints the principal outlines. The key block also serves as the basis for the color blocks. This work is not simply a matter of mechanically tracing the drawing. The carver must preserve the character of Shimazaki's lines while translating them into lines that can be printed. The printer then considered the color mixtures and printing effects, completing the work as a contemporary ukiyo-e print.

Although this example comes from an earlier edition of the Award, the essential relationship remains the same today: the publisher, Adachi, sets the theme; the eshi creates the image in response; and the image is developed into a woodcut through sustained dialogue with the artisans.

What We Look for in 2026 Applicants

For the Adachi UKIYOE Award 2026, the works submitted with the application are used to evaluate each applicant's artistic style, individuality, interests, and potential as an eshi. The submitted works themselves will not be directly reproduced as woodcuts.

After the Award, the winner, working as an eshi, will create a new design for a woodcut in consultation with Adachi staff, carvers, and printers. Applicants do not need specialist knowledge of carving or printing. We

do, however, want them to consider what kinds of images can be most effectively expressed through traditional woodcut techniques. For this reason, we encourage applicants to review past winning works and examples of woodcuts created through collaborations between past winners and artisans before applying. In judging, we will look not only for a distinctive individual artistic voice, but also for an understanding of the characteristics and expressive possibilities of traditional woodcut, and the ability to develop one's own image further through collaboration with carvers and printers.