**Sōsaku Hanga (Creative Prints, 創作版画)**

Sōsaku (creative) Hanga (prints) refers to modern Japanese prints that were consciously produced as art in their own right rather than as reproductions. At the beginning of the twentieth century in Japan, *ukiyo-e* prints had all but disappeared and highly developed printing skills were serving as a means for the reproduction of artworks. Sōsaku Hanga emerged in Japan in response to rapid urbanisation, rising individualist consciousness and an influx of information on turn-of-the-century Western graphic art. The first print recognised as Sōsaku Hanga is *Fisherman* (1904) by Yamamoto Kanae (山本鼎, 1882-1946), a professional wood-engraver and art student. But it was not until after 1910 that artists, mostly Western-style painters, began exploring the visual possibilities of prints. The *Der Sturm* woodcut exhibition in Tokyo (1914) inspired Onchi Kōshirō (恩地孝四郎, 1891-1955) to begin his semi-abstract or abstract ‘Lyric’ series [image]. This modernist print movement was largely unknown to the West before World War II. Shortly after the war, two artists Onchi and Munakata Shikō (棟方志功, 1903-1975) made Sōsaku Hanga internationally known, in distinctly different styles: Onchi at the cutting edge of Japanese modernism and Munakata exploring spiritual links with his native land.

In the mid-1910s the neo-*ukiyo-e* prints or Shin Hanga (New Prints) emerged, adopting *ukiyo-e* subjects and production systems under the direction of their publishers. Shin Hanga enjoyed commercial success and dominated overseas markets. The Sōsaku Hanga artists viewed Shin Hanga as a threat to their artistic integrity. In order to distinguish their position, the Creative Print Association defined Sōsaku Hanga as “prints designed, block-cut and printed by the artist”, possibly following the rules laid by the British organisation, the Society of Graver-Printers in Colour, which were published in *The Studio* (1910) a popular source of information for Japanese artists. But the principle could not have been applied strictly as some Sōsaku Hanga artists had others block-cut or print their work.

Exhibition venues for early Sōsaku Hanga were small private galleries and coterie magazines until the Japan Creative Print Association was formed in 1918 with its annual exhibition. The Association campaigned for the recognition of prints as creative art, with a focus on acceptance by the government-run annual art exhibition, which was achieved in 1927. As this milestone indicated that the concept of prints as artistic expression was accepted, the word ‘creative’ became redundant; it was dropped in 1931 when the Association incorporated other print organisations and became the Japan Print Association.

**References and Further reading:**

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**Image: Onchi Kōshirō, *Lyric 1* (1914)**

<http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/82.2000/>

In Japan, Onchi’s works are considered out of copyright (50 years after the artist’s death). One of the impressions is owned by the Art Gallery of New South Wales

