



Universität
Zürich ^{UZH}

Chair of East Asian Art History

University of Zurich
Institute of Art History
Rämistrasse 73
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Zurich Lectures in East Asian Art History

October 30, 2025
18:15–20:00

University of Zurich
Rämistrasse 59
8001 Zürich
Room RAA-G-01

Can't Wait to See! Whales in the Urban Imagination in Early Modern Japan

Prof. Dr. Doreen Müller
Leiden University



Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1797–1861) and Utagawa Yoshitori (act. mid 19th c.), “No. 2 Can't Wait to See It” from the series Celebrated Treasures of Mountains and Seas, woodblock print, 37.4 x 25.7 cm, 1852, registration number 2008,3037.02102, British Museum.



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Abstract

This talk explores how urban dwellers imagined whales in nineteenth-century Japan. Although people living in the capital city of Edo had no direct contact with whales, they became an increasingly popular feature of the urban imagination. Urban dwellers imagined whales as entertaining spectacles of enormous size and possessing uncannily human features such as eyes with eyelashes. At the same time, they were also aware of the existence of different modes of engaging with nature. For coastal communities in southern Japan, obtaining and processing whales was a serious and lengthy process that required careful collaboration and strenuous physical efforts. By contrast, urban dwellers incorporated nature into their leisure pursuits as they sought swift gratification from consuming prints and entertainments such as misemono shows. At first glance, there appears to be an utter disconnect between the fast-paced and commercial urban “leisure mode” and the slower local “physical mode” that was focused on production. However, a closer examination of printed guidebooks, stories based on misemono shows, and ukiyo-e prints referencing information from guidebooks shows that both modes were deeply connected in the urban imagination. In alluding to different modes of engaging with nature, some images even provided opportunities for critical reflection upon the state of urban society. Considering images of whales thus gives an insight into the nature of the developing consumer society in early modern Japan.

Doreen Müller is a historian of Japanese art focusing on the long nineteenth century. Her research investigates how artists responded in their works to social and environmental challenges as well as political changes in the nineteenth century. This includes responses to civil war as well as historical disasters such as earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and famines. Her research investigates how artists' responses to these challenges reveal changes in how Japanese society and culture have engaged with and conceptualised nature and the environment. She has a further interest in the work of female artists and the representation of Japanese women in and outside Japan.