

An Investigation of Suppression in Mid-19th Century Japan: Case Study of the 1855 Catfish Prints as a Product of Censorship

Authors : Vasanth Narayanan

Abstract : The mid-nineteenth century saw the Japanese elite and townsfolk alike undergo the now-infamous Ansei Edo earthquakes. The quakes decimated Japan in the final decades of the Tokugawa Era and, perhaps more consequentially, birthed a new genre of politically inspired artwork, the most notable of which are the namazu-e. This essay advocates an understanding of the 1855 Catfish Prints (namazu-e) that prioritizes the function of iconography and anthropomorphic deity in shaping the namazu-e into a wholly political experience that makes the censorship of the time part of its argument. The visual program is defined as the creation of a politically profitable experience, crafted through the union of explicit religion, highly masked commentary, and the impositions of censorship. The strategies by which the works are designed, in the face of censorship, to engage a less educated, pedestrian audience with its theme, including considerations of iconography, depictions of the working class, anthropomorphism, and the relationship between textual and visual elements, are discussed herein. The essay then takes up the question of the role of tense Japan-United States relations in fostering censorship and as a driver of the production of namazu-e. It is ultimately understood that the marriage of hefty censorship protocol, the explicitly religious medium, and inimical sentiment towards United States efforts at diplomacy renders the production of namazu-e an offspring of the censorship and deeply held frustrations of the time, cementing its status as a primitive form of peaceful protest against a seemingly apathetic government.

Keywords : Japan, Ansei Earthquake, Namazu, prints, censorship, religion

Conference Title : ICWHC 2021 : International Conference on World History and Cultures

Conference Location : Singapore, Singapore

Conference Dates : May 03-04, 2021