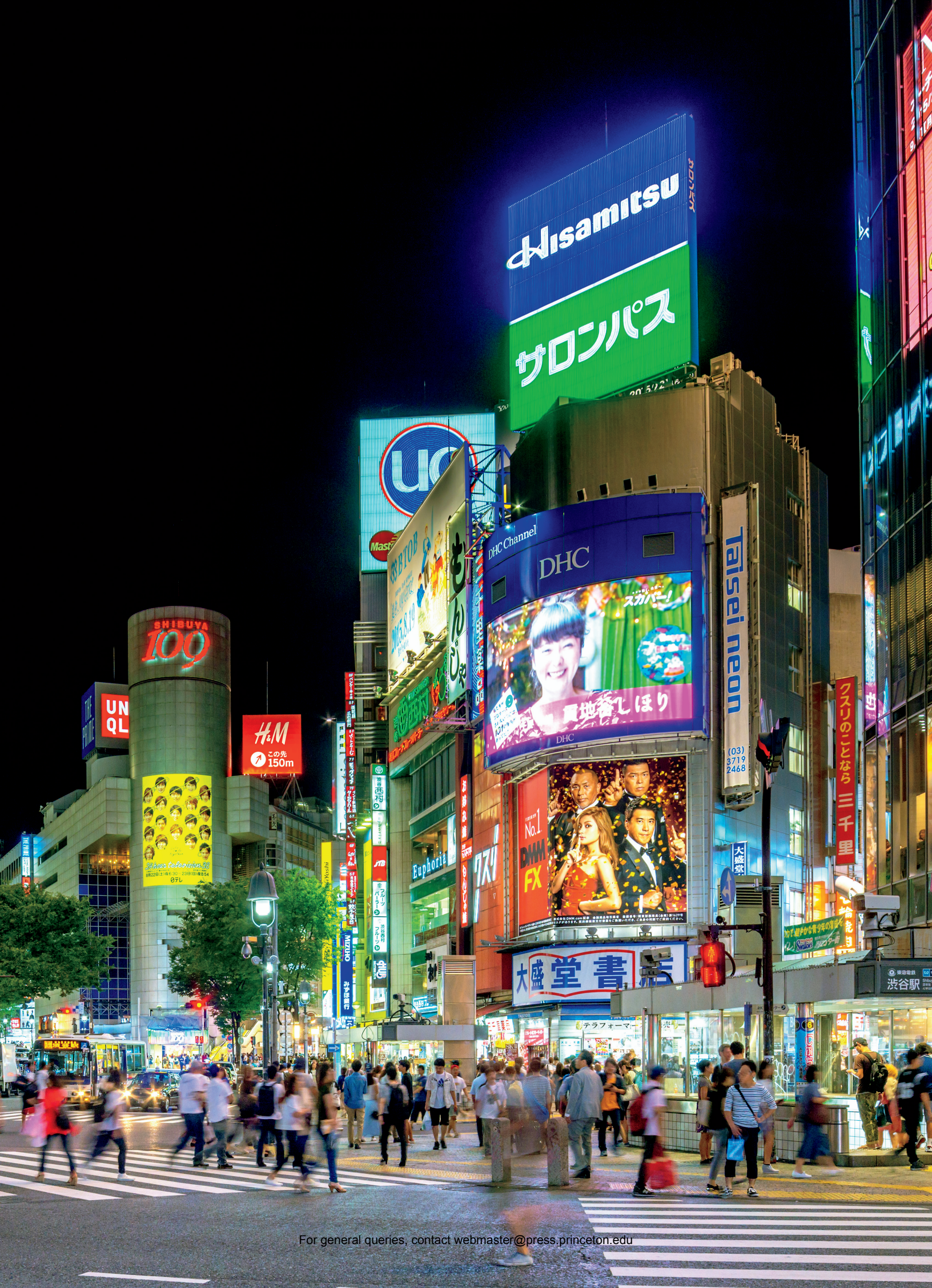


INTRODUCTION

The Neon Scramble

IN TOKYO, A COVERED CEMENT STAIRWELL rises up out of the pavement and disgorges you onto an intersection filled with people. A spectacular number of people. A surreal number of people: suited salarymen off for a round of drinks and slurred karaoke; commuters rushing for their trains or searching for a last-minute dining option; lovers meeting lovers; friends meeting friends; ubiquitous *gyaru* girls perched atop impossibly high-heeled shoes, meeting up with other gyaru girls or gelled-hair *gyaru-o* boys and doing whatever it is that they do; tourists gawking and stumbling. The entire frenetic scene is bathed in brilliant, colorful, pulsating neon light. Vivid, multi-story jumbotron images of a famous American actor touting a wristwatch, or another equally famous figure advocating a brand of cognac, flash and wink at you from on high. Glowing texts and kaleidoscopic imagery advertising department stores, pachinko parlors, bookstores, clothing stores, wedding boutiques, love hotels, purveyors of electronics, purveyors of luxury brands, restaurants, and cafes all rise vertically, virtually obliterating the night sky. As you surge forward with the tidal crowd, you try not to stare and you try not to trip. Welcome to Shibuya Crossing, also known as the "Scramble" (fig. 1).

Thought to be one of the busiest pedestrian intersections on the planet, Shibuya Crossing is invariably listed as one of the top ten things to experience on a visit to Japan. At peak hours it is estimated that more than a thousand people make the scramble with each sixty-second signal sequence. At night the crossing is singular in its intensity, as the pedestrian signals turn from red to green and thousands of evening revelers and workers from the area's thriving IT community converge in an attempt to cross the street—from all directions, at once, moving, milling, and progressing through the multi-pronged intersection in front of Shibuya Station. It is a complicated dance, one performed well by the habitué, falteringly by the novitiate, and catastrophically by the faint of heart. In the daytime the area is crowded but benign, with office workers out on their breaks, students transiting between school and cram sessions, and other assorted locals waiting for the signal and petting the paw of the statue of Hachikô, the famous dog who waited in vain for ten years for his master to return home from his daily commute. Or they might head to the Starbucks on the second floor of the QFRONT building, with its prime view of the Shibuya scene. But at night, the crossing becomes one of the hippest (and brightest) locales in the world.

Shibuya Crossing also boasts the world's highest density of neon advertising. From building-enveloping mega screens to tiny flickering accent marks in a plethora of scripts, fonts, and languages, all vying for attention, the signs brighten the night and point the way to hopeful commercial ventures—advertising by "liquid fire." Of course, Shibuya is not the only iconic center for neon advertising. Take the Las Vegas Strip or New York's Times Square, for example, or the neon signs and video screens of London's Piccadilly Circus, or the parade of neon along Shanghai's Nanjing Road. But while neon as a favored advertising medium has penetrated nearly every corner of the globe, in Japan it has perhaps attained its highest articulation, and the spectacular montage at Shibuya Crossing is unquestionably the peak of that ultimate.

The invention of the now-common neon sign is attributed to the French scientist Georges Claude (1870–1960) as a happy by-product of his experiments with liquefying air in 1902. The first commercial sign application was designed for a barbershop in Paris and erected in 1912. In America, there remains some controversy over who first employed the neon sign as commercial advertisement. Earle C. Anthony (1880–1961), a Packard car distributor in Los Angeles, has long

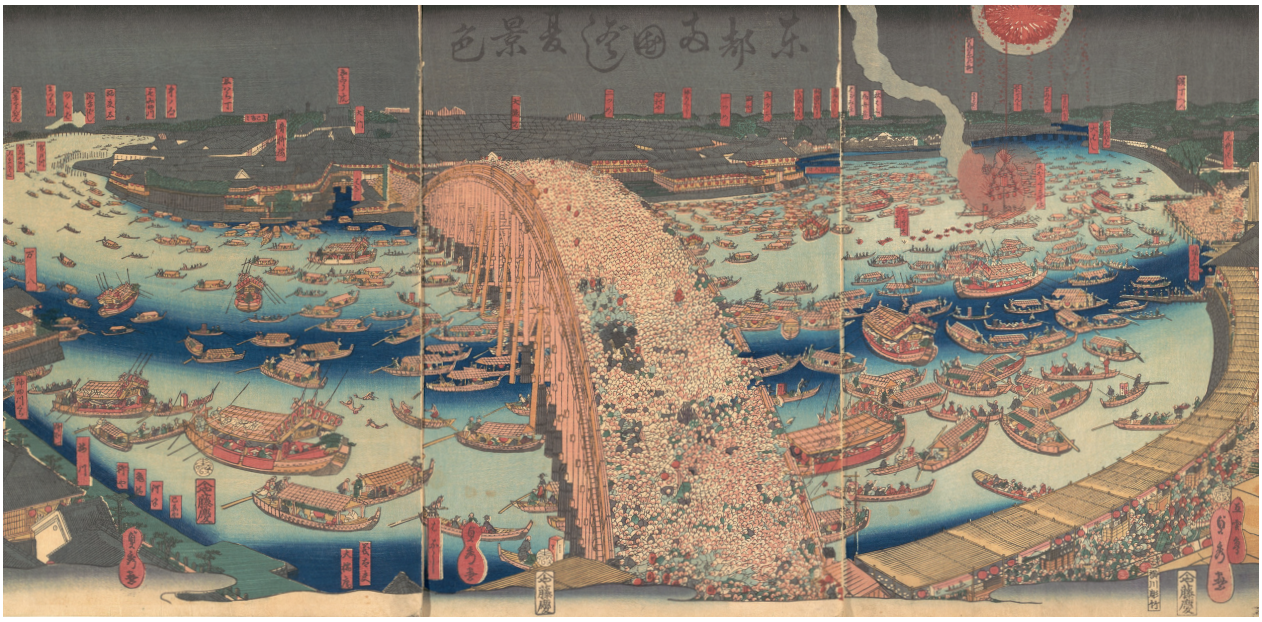
FIG. 1 Night scene of Tokyo's Shibuya Crossing, also known as the "Scramble." iStock 88283039.

FIG. 2 Utagawa Sadahide (1807–1878/9), *Tôtô Ryôgokubashi natsu keshiki* (Panoramic view of the Ryôgoku Bridge in the summer), 1859. Triptych of polychrome woodblock prints, ink and color on paper. Image (a): 13¾ × 9½ in. (34.9 × 24.1 cm); Image (b): 13¾ × 9½ in. (34.9 × 24.1 cm); Image (c): 14 × 9½ in. (35.6 × 24.1 cm). Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of William S. Lieberman, 2005, 2007.49.294a-c, www.metmuseum.org.

been accorded this bragging right for a large red sign, simply reading "Packard," that he had mounted high atop a hotel at the corner of 7th and Flower Streets, supposedly in 1923. However, recent research has shown that Anthony was not given a construction permit until late 1924 and did not actually erect the sign until January 1925, leaving a brightly lit question mark over who may actually lay claim to this particular American first.[1] But it is clear that, by the mid-1920s, neon had arrived in America in all its lurid color, hawking myriad wares and services while illuminating the night sky from coast to coast.

Japan followed quickly on the heels of this American love affair with neon and the "architecture of light," installing its first domestically produced signs in Hibiya Park in Tokyo in 1926. But Japanese neon literally hit the big time in 1957 with Sony's dramatic and massive neon sign installation at the Sukiyabashi intersection in the Ginza. Measuring 32 by 36 feet (10 by 11 meters), with each brightly glowing letter of the Sony name weighing over 580 pounds (263 kg), the sign itself weighed in at 4,960 pounds (2,250 kg). Crowds gathered to witness its first illumination, which helped secure Sony's impression on the Japanese and global consciousness as a brand name to be remembered. The rest, as they say, is glowing history. And now, images of Japan's neon street scenes, from the Ginza, Shinjuku, and Shibuya in Tokyo to Shinsaibashi in Osaka, have become singularly emblematic of modern Japan itself.

Advertising is perhaps the world's second oldest profession. Visual and written records of the development of Tokyo, originally called Edo, reveal that this city—already one of the largest in the world by the dawn of the eighteenth century, with over 1 million people—has long been noted for its intense push and clash of pedestrians and the merchants trying to attract them. Unsurprisingly, pedestrian density was highest in the principal market areas. Commercial centers such as Nihonbashi and the marketplace at the base of



the Ryôgoku Bridge were among the most congested, blending vendors, travelers, and residents in their own form of scramble.

A woodblock print by Utagawa Sadahide (1807–1878/9) depicting the Ryôgoku Bridge on a summer evening gives us an effective look at Edo crowds in 1859 (fig. 2). In this triptych, boats clog the Sumida River as it curves around the midsection of the capital on its way to Edo Bay. The foreground shows a continuous line of vendor stalls, with their thatched roofs solidly filling the banks as fireworks explode in the distance. The crowds are so densely packed along the approaches of the Ryôgoku Bridge and across its span that the artist has made no attempt to render individualized faces, just circular blobs depicting head after head after head after head. This is the Edo version of the Shibuya Scramble—over water. Famously, in 1807 the Eitai Bridge, located further downstream, collapsed under the weight of similar crowds passing over it on their way to the Fukagawa Hachiman festival at Tomioka Hachimangu Shrine; 1,400 people were killed.

While neon may have only a hundred years of history under its gaseous belt, advertising by signage is not at all a new concept. For as long as there has been a merchant or artisan trying to sell his wares in either a fixed or floating location, a sign has been sure to accompany him. Whether it was a white banner (*zhi*) fluttering atop a bamboo pole announcing the presence of a wine shop in China during the Warring States period (475–221 BCE), or an Egyptian papyrus wall poster advertising a cure for hangovers for an Alexandrian apothecary 1,900 years ago, signs and signage have historically formed the bedrock of commercial culture.[2] Advertising signs thus are a shared part of a truly global culture, with each period, region, and people practicing and expressing themselves in this particular medium based on the tastes, proclivities, and technologies of a specific time and place.

Researchers in the development of shop signs in Japan point to the practice of prominently displaying actual objects on sale as a nascent form of advertising and a precursor to our subject here, *kanban*.[3] Known specifically as *jitsubutsu kanban* (actual-object signs), this form of advertising has a documented history dating from the Nara period (710–794). One can easily imagine a marketplace where erstwhile companionable merchants and traders become intense competitors vying for customer attention and patronage, using all available means. A seller of *ashiginu* (rough silk), for example, would hang a colorful array of samples from the eaves of his assigned booth to attract the eye and coin of a customer.

This exact scene is captured in a verse recorded in Japan's oldest poetry anthology, the *Man'yôshû*, compiled around 759; it reads:

Nishi no ichi ni
Tada hitori idete
Menarabezu
Kaite shi kinu no
Akiji kori kamo

Matsumiya Saburô, in his work *Edo no kanban*, has liberally translated this verse as:

At the Western market, colorful silks are lined up at the shop,
So beautiful to look at
But since I bought some without taking a close look
And I was alone and could seek no advice
I did not buy very well.[4]

In the case of this particular customer, the colorful arrangement may have softened his judgment, and the poem introduces us perhaps to a particularly early example of false advertising.

The markets and market mechanisms of the Nara period have been well documented, with goods flowing in and out of the capital city

through sophisticated road, river, and canal networks extending far into the archipelago. And the silks described in the *Man'yôshû* represent only one commodity among many that were purchased, traded, and bartered at the formally established and closely regulated Eastern and Western Markets (*tôzai ichi*). Other products included used clothing, cotton, bast fiber, white rice, black rice, wheat, soybeans, azuki beans, salt, miso, vinegar, sesame oil, sugar, sake, firewood, charcoal, construction timber, medicines, paper, brushes, ink, wooden shoes, hardware, bamboo tools, pottery, iron, seaweed, fish, vegetables, and fruit. Additional products and transactions—though more veiled, due to strict Buddhist consumption laws—would have included horse and boar meat, weapons, and saddles.[5] A brisk trade with China would have ensured not only local staples and daily necessities such as those listed above, but also more exotic fare, such as finished silk brocades, ivory, jade, and rhino horn. All reflected a vibrant economy and marketplace, not unlike any Japanese market today (except for maybe the weapons, and, hopefully, the ivory and rhino horn). One can easily imagine that vendors employed or devised their own methods for advertising their goods and attracting the eye of potential customers, much like the silk merchant and his disappointed customer poetically immortalized above.

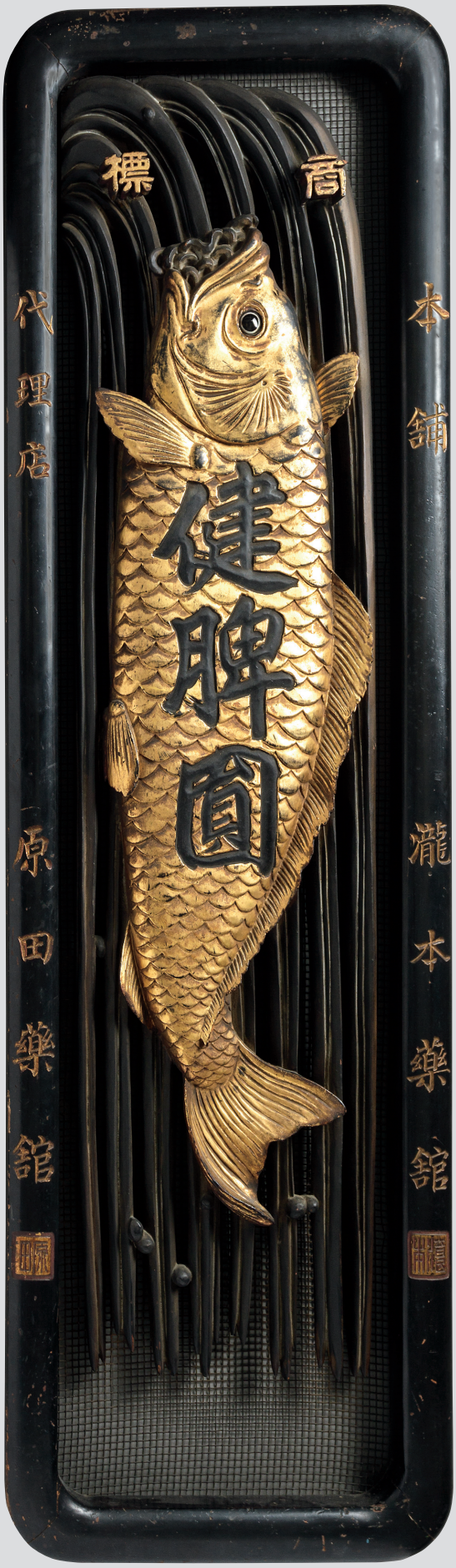
It is a long road from the Nara-period silk merchant's stall to the neon jumbotron of the Shibuya Scramble. And yet there is a distinct commonality between them: communication, a fundamental desire to transmit a message from seller to buyer. For the art historian, the lover of Japanese folk art, as well as the consumer, there is a shared delight in marveling at the signposts stationed along this meandering road—namely, the kanban that Japanese merchants used to advertise their products and services.

Kanban: Signs of the Times

Kanban, a distinctive fusion of art and commerce, refers to the traditional signs Japanese merchants and craftsmen displayed street-side to advertise their presence, denote the products or services found inside, and give individual identity and expression to the shop itself. Created from wood, bamboo, iron, paper, fabric, lacquer, or even stone, kanban form a rich visual vocabulary of traditional advertising. Elongated panels of lacquered wood ornamented with elegantly inscribed calligraphy; whimsically carved three-dimensional scenes of carp climbing waterfalls (cat. 1) or munificent deities presiding over hoards of bounty; oversized but functional Buddhist prayer beads; stencil-dyed segments of colored cloth fluttering in front of an open doorway; *geta* clogs strung in rows; sword scabbards mounted proudly on finely etched wooden plaques; iron furniture fittings of assorted sizes exploding from large wooden panels; gigantic combs; oversized parasols; Brobdingnagian writing brushes; colorfully rendered images of seductive courtesans with painted faces and coiffed hair; massive silk thread skeins—all of these are signs and images that would have been a familiar sight on traditional Japanese commercial streets.

Shop signs are an iconic folk art form, found in nearly every culture around the world. Yet, the Japanese seem to have excelled at this early take on Madison Avenue, creating a multi-faceted inventory of symbol and meaning designed to engage the viewer and entice the customer. From a hand-carved sign made by the shopkeeper himself, hanging over the doorway to his modest shop in the smallest of back-country hamlets, to a sumptuous and professionally rendered virtuoso of a sign mounted atop a tall post in the booming capital city of Edo, kanban were an integral part of Japanese trade culture.

Bustling commercial sectors were lined with kanban of varying descriptions, creating a potentially dizzying montage of imagery and signage,



1

Sage kanban for pharmacy selling Kenpien
Early twentieth century
Wood, pigment, lacquer, glass
66 × 20 × 4 in. (167 × 52 × 10 cm)
Mingei International Museum Purchase, 2012-40-001

Shop owners frequently spent significant sums of money on kanban for their shops. They used these carefully crafted signs to convey prestige, solidity, and reliability to their customers; ego may have also played a role. While some shop owners were content with kanban that conveyed a bare minimum of information, others sought out aesthetic testimonies that employed extravagant materials, resulting in beautiful works of art worthy of admiration in their own right. Here, a sage kanban of a carp climbing a waterfall is rendered with a high sense of realism and covered in gold lacquer; the characters on the fish's body advertise Kenpien medicine. Water fills and slides out of the carp's open mouth. His large eye, inset with glass, possesses an iridescent quality. A wire mesh background suspends the carved wooden strands simulating cascading water and communicates an added sense of altitude, as if the carp is climbing to great heights. The characters "tôroku shôhyô" are placed at the top of the falls, indicating that the ascending carp is a registered trademark. Along the right margin of the frame is the text "Honpo Takimoto Kusuri Kan" (Main Office of Takimoto Medicinal), followed by the Takimoto seal. The left margin reads, "Dariten Hirada Kusuri Kan" (Agent for Hirada Medicinal), followed by the Hirada seal.

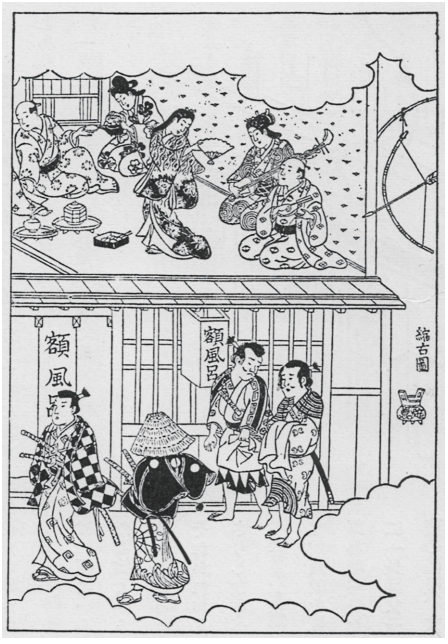


FIG. 3 Edo-period woodblock print depicting a kanban of an arrow-notched bow in the upper right, indicating a bathhouse. Reproduced from Tsuboi, *Kôshô gigei kanban kô.*

all vying to attract and seduce the potential customer. *Noren* curtains fronting the shop bore individual designs or stencil-dyed text indicating the shop name or services. *Yane* or *noki kanban* were suspended from under the eaves of the building and could be viewed from far down the street (if not blocked by a neighbor's even larger kanban). *Sage kanban,* or single-sided, hanging kanban, were flush against the side of the building. *Hako kanban* were placed on the street immediately at the entrance to the shop, resting on a light framework box with a stretched-paper upper section upon which the image of the product sold, or the name of the proprietor or shop itself, would have been professionally written. *Yôki kanban,* or container signs, simple silhouettes carved in the shape of the commodity's container, hung outside, creating a direct means of communication for purveyors of tea or vinegar, whose distinctive container shapes made them readily identifiable to even the illiterate in the community. Taking this concept further, *mokei kanban,* or model signs, featured mounted display carvings replicating in three dimensions the objects sold. Painted or relief-carved renderings on double-sided signs, called *shitta kanban*, hung just beside the door and were brought in each night in order to protect these valuable advertisements. A quick peek inside a more upscale shop might have revealed a gilded and mother-of-pearl-encrusted freestanding *oki* or *tsuitate kanban* functioning as both advertisement and room divider, shielding a customer or shopkeeper from prying eyes. *Andon kanban* or *chochin kanban,* made in a lantern style, would have been lit at night to broadcast the presence of a restaurant, tea shop, theater, or pleasure house.

For the playful Edo mind, kanban frequently functioned in code, presenting abstracted, distilled, or obliquely referential imagery to communicate to the savvy, in-the-know buyer. These brainteaser signs relied on puns (known as *hanji mono* or *goro awase*), hidden meanings (*nazo*), and parodies (*mitate*) that challenge the uninitiated today, but delighted the worldly Edo community that prided itself on sophistication. For example, a simple herring shop might have been named Yuki no Tsuki (Moon of Karma), perhaps using a giant moon as its kanban. This is a puzzling choice, unless one is versed in the classic song composed for the samisen by Tsuruyama Koto (act. mid-eighteenth century). Then one just might glimpse the wordplay in which the classic lyric, "*Honna ennishi ga konimo aroka*?" (Is there a sweeter fate [*en*] than this?) could easily be substituted with "*Honna iinishin ga konimo aroka*?" (Is there sweeter herring [*nishin*] than this?").[6] Another, more common example of wordplay kanban is found in the tradition of using an arrow

as a symbol for a bathhouse (fig. 3). This obscure image captures the similarity between the phrases "*yûmi iru*" (to shoot an arrow) and "*yû iru*" (to get into a bath).[7]

A common *nazo* (hidden meaning) example is the use of imagery from *hanafuda,* or playing cards, to sell deer, boar, and horse meat. Due to traditional Buddhist prohibitions against eating meat, purveyors of these commodities tended to remain low-key in their advertising. Code names developed: deer was referred to as *momiji* (autumn leaves), boar was *botan* (peony), and horse was *sakura* (cherry blossom). Cards from the hanafuda deck with these symbols became convenient substitutes when advertising these somewhat controversial, but not outlawed, products.[8] Interestingly, when hanafuda cards themselves became proscribed by the government for their abuse as a game of chance, similar *nazo* elements were employed for shops dealing in the cards. The term *hanafuda* literally means "flower cards" but can alternatively be read as "nose cards," so images of the long-nosed *tengu* goblin became a popular code for the shops (cat. 2).[9] Beef cattle were not introduced into Japan in large number until 1843, and the first public meat market appeared in the Takamatsu area of Osaka in 1851, at a time when Buddhist prohibitions lacked the force of earlier periods.[10] As a result, shop owners advertising beef did not have to resort to such clever subterfuge, but they did tend to write the word *gyûniku* (beef) in red letters, symbolizing red meat.[11]

An example of a *mitate,* or parody, was the common practice of a needle shop simply advertising its presence with an image of pine needles. Stylized pine needle designs were emblazoned on the shop's noren, or sometimes a shop owner would place potted pine plants on the street. Pine needles referred to the tale of Kichibi Daijin, who supposedly traveled to China in early antiquity and learned the art of sewing. When he returned to Japan, he found no metal needles and so resorted to pine needles as a substitute.[12]

Today, isolated from their surroundings, kanban have become objects to be appreciated in their own right. One can marvel at the intricacy of the carving or titter at the humorous take on a revered deity. One can puzzle over a sign's meaning or clearly imagine the shop and the wares it proffered. To explore the world of kanban is to delve into Japan's commercial and artistic roots, the evolution of trade, the emergence of mass consumer culture, and the ploys of advertising. Kanban have long been admired by collectors of traditional Japanese folk art, and examples of relevant kanban are frequently included in museum exhibitions and treatises on specific Japanese industries or craft traditions. But little effort has been made to look more deeply into their history, to examine their role in the development of Japan's now-formidable advertising industry, or, on a more basic level, to become acquainted with the talented artisans who made them.

2

Sage kanban for Oishi Tengudo playing card shop
Twentieth century
Wood, pigment
30 × 6 in. (76 × 14 cm)
Shôwa Neon Takamura Kanban Museum

This shop sign for the Kyoto-based Oishi Tengudo playing card shop features a tasseled mask of a long-nosed *tengu* goblin, surmounted by the tôroku-shôhyô (registered trademark). In the center, boldly rendered characters read, "Hana karuta ya," bearing traces of their original gilt treatment, with the black lacquer under layer showing through. Three playing cards cascade down the sign. The top one is *matsu* (pine) for January, with a crane and pine boughs; the middle one is *sakura* (cherry blossoms) for March, with a blossoming cherry tree glimpsed behind a field curtain; and finally the card for August shows a full moon with a red sky, as part of the *susuki* (grass) series. The Oishi Tengudo, established in 1800, remains an important manufacturer of various forms of *karuta*, or playing cards. It retains the tengu as its corporate symbol.