

What is Chushingura? A disease? An exotic plant? A menu item you're not sure you want to try? Most Americans are unlikely to know the meaning behind this unusual word. But ask any person from Japan, and they will know.

"The story of Chushingura amounts to being practically the national legend of Japan," says Jacqueline Atkins of the Allentown Art Museum, co-curator of a new exhibit focusing on art that illustrates the story. She compares it to the Alamo in American lore -- a real historical event that has taken on a mythical life of its own.

The tale of 47 samurai who avenged the death of their master, Lord Asano, is a story that was first told in Kabuki theater, and later in TV shows, movies and even cartoons. As demonstrated in the art museum exhibit, it is also a very popular subject for that quintessential Japanese art: the wood block print. Nearly every great master created prints based on the original events, the warriors or the actors portraying them. Among the greatest woodblock artists of them all was Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1797-1861). His prints from 1846 are the focus and the highlight.

As did other artists, Kuniyoshi created a complete set of all 47 samurai. In his case, the prints were actually based on the actors in the Kabuki play rather than the original event. Call it a case of art imitating art imitating life. Each 15-by-10-inch print of an actor is adorned with information around the image, sort of the 19th-century Japanese version of baseball cards. Atkins invites visitors to read about each (translations have been provided) and to "pick a favorite."

All of the players -- from the hero to the villain to the servant -- are described in detail. Visitors learn, for example, that Fuwa Katsuemon Masaane was "skilled at cutting a body in half" and that Hidetomo was a learned man who exchanged poetic letters with his wife. Atkins describes No. 41, the lay priest Hidenao, as "comic relief." Hidenao "wasn't really a fighter, but he became part of the vendetta because he was very committed to his master," she explains. In the print, he is depicted behind a rack of kimono, half-hiding in the tangled garments.

Even this half-scared servant is lionized, however, because of his intense loyalty. Atkins explains that loyalty, and the desire to die with honor, are very important aspects of the story, and of the Japanese character.

Atkins, who curated the exhibition with Nome Alexander, is the museum's textiles curator. However, she has long had an interest in Japanese prints and was excited to find the Kuniyoshi prints while digging around in the museum's vaults.

"The reason this whole thing started is that we have a small but very nice collection of Japanese prints here in the museum," she says. "They don't get shown a lot, but one of my particular interests is Japanese art. When I came [to work at the museum], I started looking at our Japanese prints and I discovered that we had an album of these warrior prints. They were literally bound in an album at that point, but I knew that it was a really interesting story and an interesting set of prints

that is quite well known."

Kuniyoshi was a master at his craft, crafting several intricate blocks for each print to achieve the desired effect. Subtle details are all visible -- the steam of a boiling pot, the grain on a fallen log, the simmering glow of a burning lantern, the gleaming steel of a drawn sword.

Although the prints are quite impressive, the dramatic backstory is as important a part of the exhibition as the art itself. With murder and revenge, drama and intrigue, it is easy to see why the story has an appeal that has lasted through the centuries.

"Chushingura is based on a true story that happened in 1701," Atkins explains. "Forty-seven samurai avenged their master who had been forced to kill himself. Over a period of 18 months they worked on the vendetta and finally on a snowy December night attacked the castle of the antagonist and killed him."

The word "Chushingura" actually comes from the first retelling of the event, the 1748 Kabuki play "Kanadehon Chushingura" ("The Treasury of Loyal Retainers"). The term has since come to mean any fictional retelling of the story of the 47 samurai.

The play was "immensely popular," Atkins explains. "It caused an incredible sensation in Japan at the time."

Because of censors and the touchy nature of the play at the time it was first performed -- less than 50 years after the events took place -- the names were changed. Lord Asano became Lord Enya, for example. Playwrights took other liberties as well, expanding the story, embellishing certain elements, adding love stories and additional murders. But the basic focus of the avenging samurais remained, and the themes of honor and revenge stayed intact. The play is still performed on a regular basis -- an impressive 300-year run that makes "Cats" seem like a theatrical blip.

Several items supplement the main 49 works by Kuniyoshi (the 47 samurai as well as their fallen master and the villain who had him killed). One, a five-sheet scroll, is nearly 300 years old. Other items include Atkins' photographs of Sengakuji, the temple in Tokyo where the samurai were buried and where visitors still attend every day to pay respect and light incense.

To provide further context and interest, Atkins also put on display some physical artifacts. There is a "hoari," a garment that shows a scene from Chushingura, and also some samurai swords from the 1700s which would have been very similar to the ones used in the famous attack.

It is a lot to display in a small space, and although Atkins might have preferred to have more room to work with, she is pleased with how the exhibition was hung. Viewers feel like they are in the middle of the chaos, and Atkins likes that.

"It was a chaotic battle, it was a chaotic time, and I wanted to capture a little bit of that," she says.

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## THE DETAILS

"CHUSHINGURA: LOYALTY AND REVENGE IN

18TH CENTURY JAPAN'

What: Japanese prints that tell the story of the Chusingura ("Tale of the Loyal Retainers") from the collection of the Allentown Art Museum

When: Through May 27

Where: Allentown Art Museum, 31 N. Fifth St., Allentown

Admission: \$6; \$4, seniors and students; \$3, ages 6-12; free, under 6 and members, Tuesday through Saturday; free, Sunday

Hours: 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday; noon-5 p.m. Sunday

Info: 610-432-4333, [www.allentown](http://www.allentown)

[artmuseum.org](http://artmuseum.org)

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