

Otsu-e

Otsu-e is a local style of folk painting that developed in Otsu during the Edo period (1603–1867). At that time, Otsu was the final stop before Kyoto on the Tokaido highway connecting Edo (modern-day Tokyo) and Kyoto. The city was a hub for travelers and merchants, and local artists began painting and selling pictures as souvenirs to passers-by.

The paintings originally had religious themes and were painted directly onto rough paper so they could be easily carried. The pictures were anonymously produced and designed to be hung in homes as objects of worship. The colors were basic and included just seven hues, often only the black, white, ochre, and vermilion paint used for decorating local temple buildings.

Over time, *otsu-e* expanded to include popular folktale characters and original creations. Their tone became more irreverent and satirical, showing demons dressed as kindly monks or one deity of good fortune shaving another's head. Often, a wry moral was written alongside the image, poking fun at everyday folly. As *otsu-e* became more popular, they also became more colorful, and woodblock printing techniques, like those used in Edo's *ukiyo-e*, were employed to speed up production. However, the technique was only used for outlines, and the rest of the images were still painted by hand.

As use of the Tokaido highway declined during the Meiji era (1868–1912), the popularity of *otsu-e* began to wane. Still, the art was passed down through the generations, and there is one remaining *otsu-e* artist left in the city. Takahashi Shozan is a fifth-generation painter who runs an *otsu-e* studio that has been in downtown Otsu since 1868. The Takahashi family studio is the only remaining *otsu-e* shop in the world, and holds pieces dating back to the Meiji era. As Shozan is still producing new artworks, the history and the future of the artform can both be experienced in one place.