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 TWC 511
 4 February 2022

Rhetorical Analysis: The Witch and the Skeleton Specter

Utagawa Kuniyoshi's *The Witch and the Skeleton Specter* is a masterclass of ukiyo-e art that expertly leverages the limited color options available at the time to create an illustration that is vibrant, beautiful, and at the same time, appropriately creepy. Kuniyoshi created *The Witch and the Skeleton Specter* sometime between 1843 and 1847, during a time when ukiyo-e was flourishing in Japan. Ukiyo-e art prints were created using woodblocks and paint, with full-color prints sometimes using ten blocks or more. The term "ukiyo" means "floating world," which referred to the hedonistic lifestyle enjoyed by Japan's wealthy (Hickman, 6).



Figure 1: *The Witch and the Skeleton Specter* by Utagawa Kuniyoshi is an especially large landscape ukiyo-e print.

The art in its context

During the Edo period in Japan, the merchant class grew wealthy after Edo's rapid economic growth. With this newfound wealth, many sought works of art to decorate their homes. Ukiyo-e was appealing because it depicted the halcyon life of the wealthy, who were able to indulge in pursuits previously unavailable to them (Singer, 66).

The Witch and the Skeleton Specter is an illustration from the *Story of Uto Yasutaka*, written by Santo Kyoden, an Edo poet. In this horror story, Princess Takiyasha—the "witch" in Kuniyoshi's illustration—is

hunted by Oya Taro Mitsukuni—the heroic samurai—and his companion. In her desperation, the princess turns to witchcraft and summons a demon to menace the two samurai. The tale of the ill-fated Princess Takiyasha and brave samurai Mitsukuni were part of a well-known folktale, so the subject of the illustration would have been instantly recognizable by viewers (Enger).

At the time, pigments were not mass-produced. Many pigments were sourced from natural dyes that occurred in plants and insects, which were preferable due to their composition of finer particles (“The Colorful World of Ukiyo-e”). The woodblock process of ukiyo-e meant that colors palettes were necessarily limited, though Kuniyoshi used complementary colors, analogous colors, and varying shades, tints, and intensities of these colors to achieve depth and gradation in *The Witch and the Skeleton Specter*.

The art and its purpose

The purpose of *The Witch and the Skeleton Specter* is to be a visual depiction of a scene from a well-known folklore tale about Princess Takiyasha and the samurai who hunt her on the emperor’s orders. As the samurai close in, Princess Takiyasha uses a scroll to summon a Gashadokuro to aid her—a demon in Japanese folklore that takes the form of a colossal skeleton.

The colors in this print masterfully balance the composition between lights and darks, colored spaces and spaces with no color. The main subject of the painting, the looming and ghastly Gashadokuro, is almost entirely white, sparsely shaded in hues of grey and black.



Figure 2: The pale Gashadokuro peers down at the vividly colored samurai against a background of pure black.

Its white form against the yawning black background creates maximum contrast, bringing the Gashadokuro into stark and immediate focus. This color choice of the Gashadokuro not only preserves the realism of its skeletal appearance—a realism that was unprecedented in artistic depictions of human anatomy at the time and therefore added to the horror element of the illustration—but also represents death to the viewers (Enger). In Buddhism, the primary religion in Japan, the color white is heavily associated with death (Geeraert).



Figure 3: Princess Takiyasha's form is strong with a triadic color scheme.

In contrast to the desaturated Gashadokuro, who is not of the living world, the human subjects are vibrantly colored. Princess Takiyasha wears pale yellow with several layers of other blue, red, and yellow clothing in varying intensities and shades. These colors create a triadic color scheme with high contrast and perfect balance across the color wheel, giving the princess a strong form as a subject of this illustration (Hagen & Golombisky, 118).

The samurai are painted with a similar yellow-blue-red color scheme, though Kuniyoshi uses differing shades and vibrancies of these colors to distinguish the subjects from each other. The primary colors of the leftmost samurai are a vivid blue and a shade of red that is close to purple on the color wheel. This is another deliberate color choice: Purple is synonymous with status and importance in Japan due to the historic difficulty of obtaining purple dye. In fact, for



Figure 4: Oya Taro Mitsukuni's color scheme includes purple tones to indicate his high status in society.

many years, ordinary people were forbidden from wearing purple clothing (Geeraert).

The shredded and torn blinds that divide the artwork's subjects are colored a bright yellow, contrasting against the primarily black background. Shredded blue draperies complement the yellow blinds, drawing more attention to the visual separation and providing additional aesthetic contrast for the illustration.

The art and its use

Kuniyoshi's *The Witch and the Skeleton Specter* is not just an illustration meant to help a reader visualize a part of a story. At its core, this is a decorative piece meant to be hung in a home or a shop. Use of color in the artwork creates a clear composition either from afar or up close. The stark white Gashadokuro contains such a large block of color that it can clearly be distinguished at any distance. Though the details of the human subjects could not be seen at the same distance, their colors still can. Because Kuniyoshi used triadic color schemes with high contrast and groups of large color blocks for his subjects, their general forms are visible whether the viewer is standing on the other side of the room or directly in front of the artwork.

As can be seen in the image below, even when the illustration is significantly blurred, the three main subjects can still be seen due to the use of color blocks and high color contrast. Additionally, the focus of

the subjects flows from most important to least important along with the narrative of the story: The Gashadokuro (subject 1) looms above the samurai Mitsukuni and his companion (subject 2), while Princess Takiyasha (subject 3) completes her wicked summoning in an adjacent room. The vivid yellow and blue blinds visually separate these three different subjects from a distance as well. These subjects make up a bright foreground, while the black abyss and black-and-grey flooring makes a solid contrasting background.

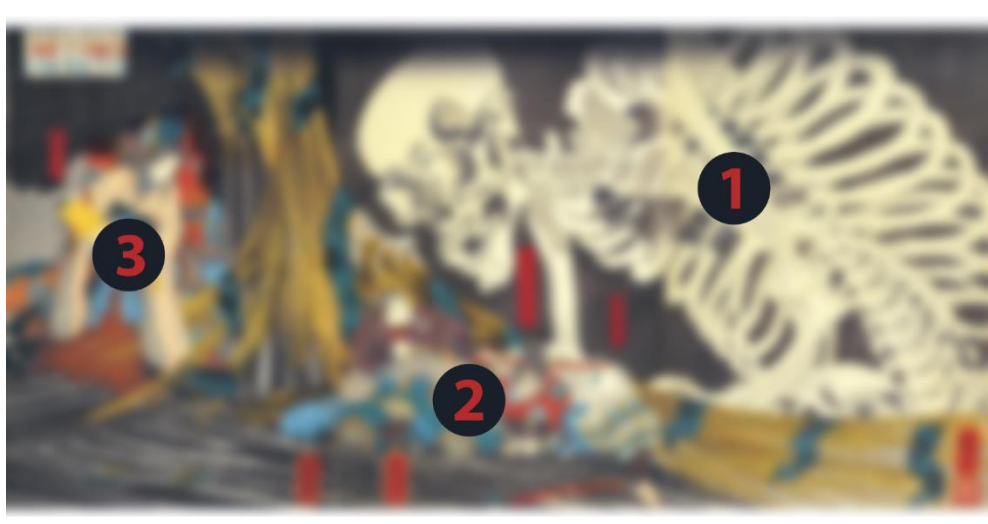


Figure 5: When viewed from a distance, each subject is still clearly visible in order of its importance.

Final thoughts

Color theory is a major cornerstone of an artwork's success, and it is an area where *The Witch and the Skeleton Specter* excels. As a decorative piece for a home, Kuniyoshi's illustration is discernable and aesthetically pleasing when viewed either from a distance or up close because of its thoughtful color schemes, color groupings, use of color blocks, and excellent contrast. As an illustration for the well-known tale of the doomed Princess Takiyashi, her ghoulish Gashadokuro, and the hounding samurai, the piece tells the story with fantastical, vivid, appropriately horror-themed visuals propped up by smart color choices. And in the context of ukiyo-e art, *The Witch and the Skeleton Specter* is a masterpiece that makes clever use of the limited color palettes available for the time.

References

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