When the Wadsworth Atheneum purchased a remarkably large and famous scroll painting by the legendary ukiyo-e artist Kitagawa Utamaro in 1957, appreciating Japanese art was a fundamentally different exercise from what it is today. *Cherry Blossoms at Yoshiwara* (Fig. 5) was well known: it and its companions, *Fukagawa in the Snow* (Fig. 6) and *Moonlight Revelry at Dozo Sagami* (Fig. 10), had been exhibited together in Japan in 1879, photographed, and purchased in Paris about a decade later by the legendary dealer Siegfried Bing, and championed as exemplifying a particular moment in Japanese art when attention and subject matter turned at once to the quotidian and the luxurious. The painting spoke for itself as a visually lush object of unquestioned virtuosity. Its sheer beauty and deeply exotic character captivated a curious public in 1950s New England, much as it must have when it was first presented to Western audiences in late nineteenth-century Paris. But the context of its

*Fig. 1. Detail of Cherry Blossoms at Yoshiwara by Kitagawa Utamaro (1753–1806), c. 1793. • Fig. 2. Detail Moonlight Revelry at Dozo Sagami, c. 1788. • Fig. 3. Detail Fukagawa in the Snow, c. 1802–1806. • Fig. 4. Samurai sword, by Kamikos Takenaka, c. 1853. Steel and wood; length 43 1/2 inches. Wadsworth Atheneum: Museum of Art, Hartford, Connecticut, Elizabeth Hart Jarvis Colt Collection.*
creation, its meaning as a work of art, and the relationship among the three large scroll paintings had not been the subject of a major scholarly examination. The monographic exhibition organized by the British Museum in 1996 was handicapped by the unavailability of the other two paintings—one (Fukagawa in the Snow) essentially untraced in private hands in Japan, the other (Moonlight Rev- elry at Dozo Sagami) restricted from travel by the terms of Charles Lang Freer’s will regarding his gift of his collection to the nation.

Thanks to the dramatic resurfacing of Fukagawa in the Snow on the market in 2012, three distinct exhibitions this year will re-engage the three paintings and offer a fresh public consideration of Utamaro. The first—Utamaro and the Lure of Japan, which opened on January 7 at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut—provides the first U. S. landfall of Fukagawa in an unprecedented exchange with the Okada Museum of Art in Hakone, Japan. The exhibition will not only reunite Cherry Blossoms with Fukagawa in the Snow but will put them within the specific collecting context that saw Utamaro’s climb to fame in the West. People in

Connecticut—like those in much of newly industrialized America—became enthralled by the opulence and elegance of the first generation of ukiyo-e artists, and nineteenth-century industrialists embraced both the fashion for collecting Japanese culture proper and the japonisme movement in French and American art spawned by the new political engagement with Japan.

One arbiter of this craze for things Japanese was Hartford native Samuel Colt (1814–1862), who had a direct connection to the reopening of Japan: a pair of Colt revolvers were among the gifts Commodore Matthew Perry presented to the shogun on his visit to open relations between the two nations (samurai swords and a needlepoint textile were given in return). Utamaro and the Lure of Japan includes outstanding items not only from the 1905 Colt Bequest to the Wadsworth but also from several other late nineteenth-century gifts of Japanese textiles, ceramics, lacquerware, prints, and weaponry to the museum; examples of ukiyo-e prints by Harunobu, Hiroshige, Masanobu, Toyokuni, and Utamaro; and decorative arts from the same era. They join a selection of Utamaro’s prints of “beautiful ladies,” a body of work that isolated individual personalities from within the geisha world seen more completely in the two large paintings.

Through these works one can see the period idea of Japan and begin to rediscover the American collecting landscape that embraced the legend of Utamaro as both impresario and rake, client of the pleasure dome and its visual diarist.

A different kind of exhibition is planned by the Freer and Sackler Galleries in Washington, D.C., under the curatorial leadership of ukiyo-e scholar Julie Nelson Davis from the University of Pennsylvania, working with Freer and Sackler senior curator of Japanese art, James Ulak. In reuniting all three paintings in Inventing Utamaro: A Japanese Masterpiece Rediscovered (April 8 to July 9), Professor Davis takes the opportunity to ask a number of fundamental questions tied directly to Utamaro’s work and its context: What led to his rise in fame around 1900? What was his relationship to Edo’s brothels, their promotion through printed books and broadsides, and their outward mythology? How might we approach these objects, and subjects, today? Energizing the project in Washington are several loans that situate Utamaro in his own day and within the legend-making era of Belle Époque.
Paris. Within this framework the stylized, sexualized abstraction of the female form so characteristic of Utamaro’s art can be examined closely, satisfying both the connoisseur’s search for the artist and the social historian’s quest for context.

The third project is being organized by the Okada Museum in Hakone, a hot-springs resort town on the slopes of Mount Fuji about an hour and a half’s drive from Tokyo. Its collections are extraordinarily rich in ceramics from China, Japan, and Korea, as well as in scrolls and screens from the Meiji period and earlier. Under the directorship of Kobayashi Tadashi the Okada Museum has also been assembling an impressive collection of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century paintings. The upcoming exhibition (planned for July to October) will place Cherry Blossoms and Fugaku in the Snow within the context of the different painting styles and formats represented in the museum.