Dr. John Carpenter (Mary Griggs Burke Curator of Japanese Art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art) will be delivering the Keynote Lecture during this year's symposium, "KABUKI in PRINT: Actor, Fans, Image, and Medium in Early Modern Japan and Beyond," taking place at the University of Chicago from November 4-5.

Dr. Carpenter’s lecture is entitled, "A Poetics of Inscribed Kabuki Actor Portraits."

LECTURE ABSTRACT

During the late Tokugawa period, in both Edo and Osaka there was a remarkable fluorescence of popular poetry, both 17-syllable hokku and 31-syllable kyōka. Already in the case of early ukiyo-e, we witness the occasional appearance of Edo-style haikai (Edo-za haikai) on prints and the participation of Kabuki actors in this movement. By the early nineteenth century it became even more common to see poems on actor prints, whether privately commissioned surimono or commercially issued nishiki-e. Many amateur poets and often Kabuki actors themselves participated in poetry gatherings, and some poetry circles served as de facto fan clubs for famous performers. In Edo, for instance, the Mimasu poetry circle was founded with the support of Ichikawa Danjūrō V (1741–1806), who believed that training in poetry was an essential skill for an actor.

To shed light on this literary phenomenon, this presentation will analyze various poetic inscriptions on portraits of Kabuki actors, both paintings and prints, to analyze how and why they were composed and by whom. We discover that it became an established convention for poetic inscriptions to be added to memorial portraits of famous actors, sometimes composed by loyal fans, sometimes by other actors. We will also examine the use of theatrical terms and literary allusion to add levels of interpretation and enjoyment of the images of actors and scenes from plays. It is also interesting to observe how the distinctive calligraphy styles of actors and poets were harnessed to add a dynamic new visual dimension to print designs.