

# Bodies of Proof: Little People, *Yokohama-e*, and the Imagined Foreigner

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Wednesday, 21 January 2026 (In Person Only)

15:30–17:00

Room 6019

Kanagawa University, Minatomirai Campus

**Abstract:** In 1859, a genre of ukiyo-e prints known as *yokohama-e* appeared almost overnight. Capitalizing on domestic interest in the newly opened foreign settlement in Yokohama, artists and their publishers presented to the eager consumer a fascinating array of images of the new foreigners who had arrived on Japanese shores. These *yokohama-e* depicted the exotic costumes and unfamiliar customs of the members of the Ansei Five-Power Treaty nations: America, France, Russia, Britain, and Holland. Popular prints showed these foreigners walking the streets of Yokohama, playing games, and even hosting parties.

While scholars and collectors have long been interested in how *yokohama-e* illustrate the Japanese view of Western foreigners who arrived during the 1850s through the 1870s, the relationship between observed reality and printed image was complicated, as artists had few opportunities to observe foreign residents. This paper investigates this complicated relationship through a small group of *yokohama-e* that depict *kobito* (literally “little people”) who supposedly had arrived in Yokohama from the far-off country of Kobitojima in the early 1860s. Measuring mere centimeters tall, these imagined foreigners hailed from a fictional country. It is easy for the modern viewer to simply dismiss these prints as laughable misunderstandings or flights of fancy on the part of the Edo artist. However, like many other *yokohama-e*, these prints employed a number of visual strategies to create compelling images, seducing the viewer with their purported realism. Prints of *kobito* illustrate the ways *yokohama-e* drew on the broader Edo print culture to create works that could inform and entertain their viewers. These printed images of imagined peoples helped Edo viewers navigate a new world where encounters with foreigners was increasingly becoming a reality.



Utagawa Yoshikazu, *Kobitojima* (Little People Island), 1863. Philadelphia Museum of Art.

## To Attend in Person:

Preregistration via the adjacent QR code at least a day in advance for those coming in person from outside the KU community is greatly appreciated. If you are coming from off campus, please also register as a Guest at the Information counter near the entrance before coming up to the room.

ご来場の方：神奈川大学関係者は事前登録不要です。学外の方は前日までに QR コードにて事前登録をお願いします。当日は 1F の Information カウンターで Guest 登録を済ましてから、部屋までお越しください。

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