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**WOMEN IN UKIYO-E: EXAMINING UTAMARO'S BIJIN-GA PRINTS AS
REFLECTIONS OF THE SOCIOPOLITICAL AND ECONOMIC CONDITIONS OF
WOMEN IN EDO**

**A thesis submitted to
Regis College
The Honors Program
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for Graduation with Honors**

by

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May 2020

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PREFACE and ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis first looks at the social, political and economic conditions in Japan surrounding the development of *ukiyo-e*. *Ukiyo-e* prints emerge during a time of unprecedented urban growth and were one of the first iterations of art by the people, for the people in the world, often humorously subverting the ruling authority in Japan. The prints, which have inspired Western artists and remain in popular culture even today, were largely influential in their own time, as they were part of a rapidly expanding network of information accessible to contemporary Japanese through infrastructural development and printing technologies.

Bijin-ga, then, as a subgenre of *ukiyo-e*, had a comparable influence. Kitagawa Utamaro, the principal artist in this study, mainly worked in this genre. The subjects of his prints, however, are the women of the legally sanctioned prostitution and entertainment district in Edo. I examine the role of these women in Edo society, as prominent figures in the public sphere. I then examine the narrative constructed around these women by the prints, as well as the narrative handed to Japanese subjects by the Tokugawa shogunate. What we read of women's position and role in society, however, is only one small part of their actual experience. In an effort to more fully understand the sociopolitical and economic status of the women, I turn to Utamaro's prints. While incredibly specific to Edo Japan, the issues surrounding representation in Utamaro's

prints remain relevant to us today, as avid consumers of these works. Efforts to understand the works of art beyond the male narrative that Utamaro partakes in then plays a role in our own contemporary understanding of representation.

CHAPTER ONE: Edo under Tokugawa Rule

Ukiyo-e prints, while perhaps not universally recognizable by name, are certainly recognizable by style. Katsushika Hokusai's (1760-1849) "The Great Wave off Kanagawa" (illus. 1), or simply "The Great Wave," has evolved into perhaps one of the defining pieces of Japanese art in Western culture. To us, as Westerners, its



Illustration 1: Katsushika Hokusai, "Under the Wave off Kanagawa" (Kanagawa oki nami ura) from the series *Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji* (*Fugaku sanjūrokkei*), 1830-32, woodblock print, 24.7 x 37.9 cm.

recognizability lies in its uniquely "Japanese" style: the bright, saturated colors contained by bold lines. The forms are solid yet dynamic, as the scene seems frozen in time. In "The Great Wave," we are drawn in by the boats colliding against the rough surface of the sea; Mount Fuji undeniably dwarfed by the wave. The print is so captivating because

it dares to put down those bright colors; its lines are not hidden away but proudly displayed.

Perhaps we are drawn to these prints because they are so different from our understanding of visual art as inherited by Western tradition. Instead of attempting to recreate nature, “The Great Wave” embraces the “flatness” of the canvas, the saturation of the ink, and celebrates the non-realistic portrayal of the world. It’s a stunning break from art as we know it.

Vibrant colors, defined forms, nontraditional compositional planes: these are the characteristics of the *ukiyo-e*, which developed in Japan during the Edo period (1603 – 1867). The prints have had a profound impact on art globally,¹ but their origin is complicated and tied to a unique period of time in Japanese history. When these prints made their way over to the Western art world, their sociopolitical context was dropped by the artists who took inspiration from the style. This is perhaps why we view *ukiyo-e* prints like “The Great Wave” as divorced from a specific place and time in Japan and instead merely seen as “Japanese.”²

To call “The Great Wave” and *ukiyo-e* prints merely “Japanese” is to rob us of a true experience of these works. We become complacent and lazy, not only in our characterizations of Japanese art, but also our characterizations of Japan; because while

¹ *Ukiyo-e* prints aligned with the shift of Western painting towards abstraction, as perspective and depth became less important. These Japanese prints prioritized bold colors, negative space, and patterns over a realistic depiction of nature or people.

² Modernist painters like Mary Cassatt and Vincent Van Gogh were particularly inspired by the *ukiyo-e* prints. This movement in France was called *japonisme*. See Colta Ives, “Japonisme,” in *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*, (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000), http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/jpon/hd_jpon.htm (October 2004). See also Edward Said’s “Orientalism” for further reading on the one-dimensional representation of an ‘exotic’ Eastern culture.

“The Great Wave” represents a shift away from tradition for Western civilization, it also represents a shift away from tradition for Japan. *Ukiyo-e*’s development is intricately tied to complex political and societal forces which escape our own understanding as casual observers. Leaning on the crutch of “Japanese,” we miss the opportunity to understand these works beyond their contributions to Western art history.

The first step in reclaiming the narratives overlooked in the past is to bring the prints and their historical context back together; so, we should ask, what are *ukiyo-e* prints in the context of Japanese history?

The Edo period was characterized by a feudal ruling system introduced with Tokugawa Ieyasu’s (1543 – 1616) seize of power over warring *daimyōs*, or military lords. The Emperor, as always, stood as the untouchable ruler of Japan; but it was his military leader, the *shōgun*, who ruled in every practical sense during this period. For this reason, the Edo period is also known as the Tokugawa period: a long line of *shōguns* from the Tokugawa family ruled from its beginning in 1603 until its end in 1868. The Tokugawa *shōguns* sought to secure their power while also maintaining strict control over the *daimyō* and general population of Japan. Japanese subjects were divided into social classes, which determined status, responsibilities to the government, and other affairs in the social and political realms (see fig. 1).³ The Tokugawa vision for Japan was one of order and control, the regulations from this era reflected a unified nation under a

³ Amy Stanley, *Selling Women: Prostitution, Markets, and the Household in Early Modern Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 26. Social classes determined taxes, places of residency, labor, legal standing and more.

centralized power. As *ukiyo-e* prints stand indicative of, however, it was not so easy for that centralized power to seize control of the common people.

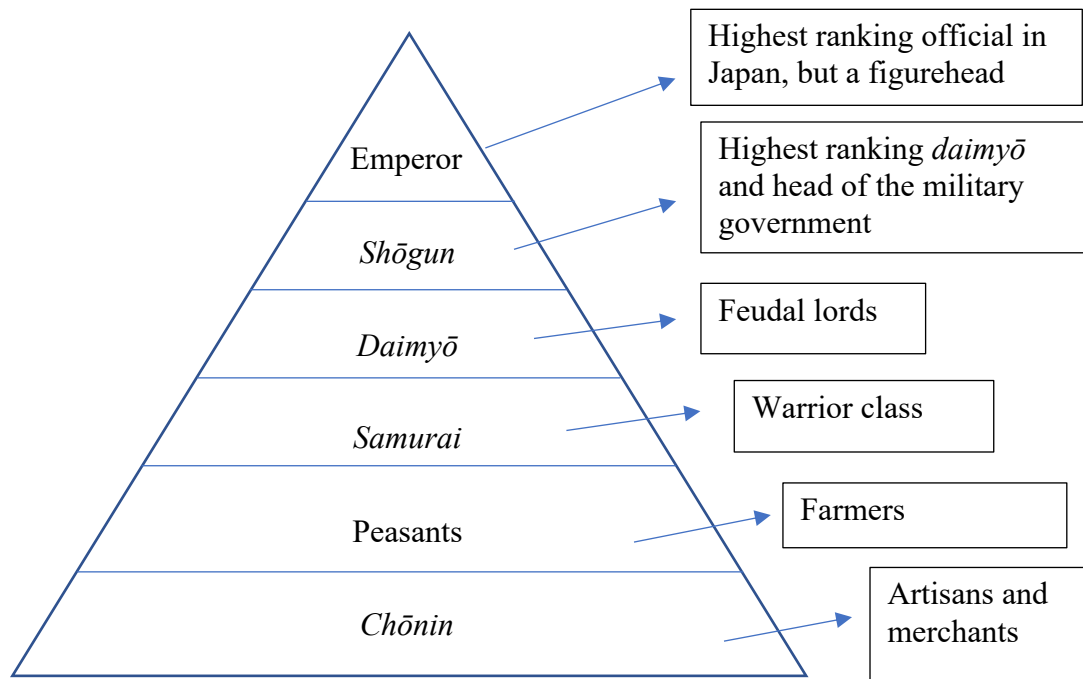


Figure 1: Edo society hierarchies.

In addition to the secular aspects of society, the Tokugawa shogunate also ventured to encourage certain philosophies and ideologies. These were Buddhism and Neo-Confucianism. Both of these ideologies identified women as inferior to men. In the introduction to *Women and Class in Japanese History*, Hitomi Tonomura and Anne Walthall explain: “The lust for women hindered Buddhist men’s ability to seek enlightenment. The source of this problem was declared to be women, who aroused men’s lust and could not control their own. It was, therefore, women who faced insurmountable doctrinal hurdles to achieving nirvana.”⁴ This sentiment certainly finds

⁴ Hitomi Tonomura and Anne Walthall, “Introduction,” in *Women and Class in Japanese History*, ed. Hitomi Tonomura, Anne Walthall and Wakita Haruko. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 4.

its way into *ukiyo-e* prints, where women's sexuality is presented as a sort of weapon against the responsible and upright man. David Pollack, a researcher and professor of Japanese literature and art, in his essay "Marketing Desire: Advertising and Sexuality in Edo Literature, Drama, and Art," uses a contemporary painting and woodblock print which depicts a holy man, Kume, tumbling down from the skies at the sight of a woman washing her legs. Pollack writes, "Even as this painting earnestly cautions against human sexual passion, it cannot help parodying the impossible hope of its repression—the usual response during the Edo period to this profound ideological contradiction."⁵ The scenario Pollack describes was depicted again some hundred years later in a woodblock print by Utagawa Kunisada I (see illus. 2). Buddhism's influence on the people of Edo, especially in regard to women and sexuality, was substantial so that the characterizations of women as immoral beings was largely uncontested during the Edo period.

Neo-Confucianism worked parallelly with the instantiated social hierarchy to define moral guidelines for women to follow. It was largely the backbone of the class delineations and accompanying political responsibilities. Women, then, were addressed as political entities. *Ukiyo-e* and Utamaro art historian Julie Nelson Davis summarizes the impact of Neo-Confucianist ideals on women: "A women's value thus resided in her chastity and mildness, self-effacement and self-control, and, most of all, her service and

By Japan's medieval period, they argue, which would be before the Edo period, Pure Land Buddhism was more popular. It placed less emphasis on individual and personal efforts towards achieving nirvana and instead focused on bodhisattvas or mantras. Nonetheless, the negative characterization of women and women's sexuality was present.

⁵ David Pollack, "Marketing Desire: Advertising and Sexuality in Edo Literature, Drama, and Art," in *Gender and Power in the Japanese Visual Field* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2003), 71-2.



Illustration 2: Utagawa Kunisada I (Toyokuni III), "Kume no Sennin," from the series *Pictures of Dolls* (*Ningyō no zu*), 1856, woodblock print, 35.3 x 24.3 cm.

submission to patriarchal authority.”⁶ Guidelines on how women should specifically embody these values could typically be found in texts, but they also were present in some later *ukiyo-e* prints, including Utamaro’s.⁷ Thus we find that while perhaps not held as untouchable ideals (often Buddhism and parody went hand-in-hand in the *ukiyo-e*), Buddhism and Neo-Confucianism pervaded Edo society not just as a top-down moral order from the

Tokugawa shogunate, but also as an ideology with which the people of Edo regularly interacted on their own terms and in their own mediums (i.e. *ukiyo-e* prints).

⁶ Julie Nelson Davis, *Utamaro and the Spectacle of Beauty* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2007), 173.

⁷ *The Parent’s Moralizing Spectacles* (*Kyōken oya no megane*), 1802, is one example.

In solidifying their authority, the Tokugawa shogunate strategized to keep its newly established capital, Edo, at the political and social center of Japan. Edo, now modern-day Tokyo, under Tokugawa rule, developed into a culturally influential city. As the newly crowned epicenter of commerce, it is natural that it became a city of art. Beyond this, Edo became the backdrop for innovation in art, as it signaled a breakaway from the old traditions of Japan. The new authority, the Tokugawa shogunate, and the new capital, Edo, instigated a major shift in Japanese culture. For centuries, the capital of Japan had been Kyoto, inextricably tied to the periods of Japan where royalty dominated and flourished.⁸ As a result of the move to Edo, not only did the physical landscape of Edo change, but the society formed by its inhabitants changed as well.

One of the important policies of the shogunate was alternate attendance (*sankin kōtai*) which required that the *daimyō* live in Edo every other year.⁹ The shogun's alternate attendance policy not only ensured that the *daimyō* were within grasp, but also helped the development of the new capital. With each *daimyō*'s royal entourage constantly traveling back and forth, efficient roads became a necessity. The city had to be expanded to accompany the countless households. With the new population, money followed. Soon, Edo was a city of commerce. Additionally, with women and children left behind by the *daimyō* to run the household in their territory, Edo became a city of men. The economy then reshaped itself around the desires of men.

⁸ Kyoto was the capital during the Heian period (794-1185). During this time, the Emperor and his court were the main producers and consumers of art. This is also when Murasaki Shikibu wrote *The Tale of Genji*. Interestingly, in *Gender in Japanese Art*, Chino Kaori characterizes this period as valuing “feminine” qualities. The Tokugawa Shogun's decision to then move his capital and reject Kyoto aligns with the rejection of female autonomy that occurred in the Edo period.

⁹ Stanley, 26.

It is these conditions which allowed for the sex trade to develop rapidly. Seeing such a rapid increase in the demand for sexual services, and following in the way of Kyoto, an Edo merchant submitted a proposal to the shogun to create an officially licensed district which would specialize in sexual services in 1613.¹⁰

And so, five years later, in 1618, in the heart of the Tokugawa shogunate, *ukiyo*, the floating world, was created.

¹⁰ Stanley, 45.

CHAPTER TWO: *Ukiyo*, the Floating World, and Yoshiwara

The floating world was a phenomenon unique to its time and place. As an official government entity, it affected many dimensions of Japanese people's lives. With the shogunal concern for morality in general, and women's morality especially, one would surmise that a red-light district would reside on the fringes of society. In fact, it was quite the opposite, overtaking fashion and culture.¹¹ Furthermore, the floating world's existence on the artistic plane would inspire centuries of artists from different countries to challenge traditional artistic conventions. No longer was culture and art limited to the royalty and upper classes: those ideas were left behind in Kyoto, in the old capital. Instead, *ukiyo* art existed for the people and by the people.

The floating world, *ukiyo* was also a part of a revolution in Japanese art that acknowledged the common people as consumers. Shogunal policies like *sanken kōtai* which encouraged the commercialization of Edo transformed Edo inhabitants into sellers and buyers.

Tsuji Nobuo speaks to the shift in consciousness in the *History of Art in Japan*:

In earlier times, the main producers of art had been members of the ruling elite (aristocrats and warriors), but now townspeople took the lead, drawing on their daily lives for creative inspiration and successfully popularizing their work in a range of urban settings. This is the distinguishing feature of Edo-period art. In no other culture of the same period do we find a situation in which members of a stratum of society without any political power, banned from traveling abroad, nurtured the arts to such a high standard on their own terms.¹²

¹¹ Pollack, 85. Oftentimes, famous courtesans or actors would be drawn wearing or using popular products, such as sake or make-up.

¹² Tsuji Nobuo, *History of Art in Japan* (University of Tokyo Press, 2019), 306.

Chōnin, peasants, and merchants suddenly had the gates of art flung open to them, and the floating world became its incubator.

As a concept, *ukiyo* was a mode of thinking and a way of living that cherished fleeting moments and pleasure above all. It was borderline hedonistic, prioritizing pleasure over discipline or duty. With a ruling class as seemingly stifling as the Tokugawa, the development of such a lifestyle seems almost natural, as a way to escape and resist the confining rules of everyday life.

Ukiyo, however, was not limited to an abstract idea that Edo residents merely talked about. The concept developed from a physical locale, that is, the legally sanctioned entertainment district: Yoshiwara. Yoshiwara was the ward instituted in 1618 at the behest of a merchant wanting to capitalize on a growing demand. Edo, after all, was quickly turning into a bed of commercial enterprises, where many goods and services were becoming available to be bought and sold by anyone who could afford them. Of these goods and service chiefly in demand were art (*ukiyo-e* prints) and sex (Yoshiwara).

Yoshiwara is where *ukiyo* was practiced and perfected by *chōnin*, *samurai*, and occasionally *daimyō*.¹³ The ward itself was a small, closed-off area of the city, but it would come to define the culture of the Edo period for the Japanese; and the artists who painted the floating world and its inhabitants, like Kitagawa Utamaro (1753-1806), would

¹³ Davis, 117. The social classes that Yoshiwara's clients belong to varied over the numerous years that it operated; however, for the most part, samurai and daimyō were the main frequenters of the pleasure district in the first years of operation, while townsmen were in the second half. One thing that was consistent in Yoshiwara's years of operation was its ban of women. Women were not allowed to enter the district without being accompanied by a man; and if she wanted to enter alone, she needed a letter of permission from her husband granting her access.

transform Western artistic tradition for centuries after. The district boasted the famed kabuki theatre, immortalized in prints as part of the *ukiyo-e* tradition. It was a cultural center for an emerging class of merchants, flourishing due to the shogunal regulations which brought people and commerce to their new capital. It inspired and produced art that would become hallmarks of not just Japan, but all of Asia, like Hokusai's "The Great Wave."

Speaking to the ward's influence, two *ukiyo-e* artists, almost one hundred years apart, depict a visitor's first view of this iconic place (see illus. 3 and 4). Both Hiroshige and Torii Kiyotada I depict the gates of the ward open and inviting. We see figures dotting the streets, courtesans strolling around accompanied by younger apprentices and men looking to spend their money. We see in these prints an inkling of the role Yoshiwara played in the lives of Edo residents. Hiroshige and Kiyotada I show the ward



Illustration 3: Torii Kiyotada I, "The Main Gate, New Yoshiwara" (Shin-Yoshiwara ōman-guchi), 1745, woodblock print, 43.3 x 64 cm.

on days of celebrations and festivals, when courtesans would parade in ceremony and the ward was less isolated.

On some level, *ukiyo*, the floating world, was an ideological form of



Illustration 4: Utagawa Hiroshige, "Cherry Blossoms on Naka-no-chō in the Yoshiwara" (Yoshiwara Naka-no-chō sakura no zu), from the series *Famous Places in the Eastern Capital (Tōto meisho)*, 1839-42, woodblock print, 23.6 x 37.0 cm.

rebellion. The ward was legally sanctioned, but this was mainly done in an attempt to control what was already growing. For a government that endorsed Neo-Confucian ideals, which emphasized duty and responsibility, a pleasure district was almost in opposition of their

sociopolitical agenda. The people of Edo who established the ward and supported it were able to participate in this rebellion by neglecting their political duties and partaking in the culture of play that Yoshiwara supplied. Even the name for Yoshiwara, *ukiyo*, was taken from a Buddhist concept.

Japanese historian Tatsurō Akai explains the origin of *ukiyo*, which first was written down in the fourteenth century. "In these instances, however, the characters used to write *ukiyo* have the meaning 'world of sorrow,' the medieval or Buddhist notion of a transient, sorrow-ridden world that stands in implicit contrast to the paradise of the Pure Land."¹⁴ By the time Yoshiwara is well-established, however, the literature and prints

¹⁴ Tatsurō Akai, "The Common People and Painting." *Tokugawa Japan*. (University of Tokyo, 1990), 180.

have transformed the meaning of *ukiyo*. From the novel *Ukiyo monogatari* (“Tales of the Floating World”) published in 1655, the following definition is in the preface:

In this world, everything is a source of interest. And yet just one step ahead lies darkness. So we should cast off all gloomy thoughts about our earthly lot and enjoy the pleasures of snow, moon, flowers, and autumn leaves, singing songs and drinking wine; living our lives like a gourd bobbing buoyantly downstream. This is the floating world.¹⁵

And so, the culture surrounding Yoshiwara began from an appropriated word; and this borderline blasphemous tradition would be continued through the art that came from this ward. Artists like Utamaro would continually push the boundaries of what the Tokugawa shogunate would allow, and this was no doubt a result of *ukiyo*’s rebellious beginnings.

The floating world did not develop purely from an oppressed class eager to grasp at some semblance of autonomy, although this did, of course, offer a motivation. In her book *Selling Women*, historian Amy Stanley traces the development of prostitution throughout Japan. She seamlessly links the demand in the market of prostitution to the creation of Yoshiwara: an economical need in which the Tokugawa shogunate saw a solution to controlling the sociopolitical status of brothels and prostitutes.¹⁶

Rules decreed at the establishment of the district enforced the confinement of courtesans to the district, creating a commodity (the prostitutes) which could not be obtained anywhere other than the district. The rules were the following:

1. No brothel could operate outside the quarter.
2. Clients could not stay for more than a day and a night.

¹⁵ Akai, 179.

¹⁶ Stanley, *Selling Women*, “Part One: Regulation and the Logic of the Household.”

3. Courtesans could not wear clothing of silver or gold.
4. The buildings must follow Edo architectural style.
5. Suspicious or unknown persons regardless of class could be questioned and reported to the district police.¹⁷

The conditions that the shogunate demanded in the creation of Yoshiwara reflect the desire for control. Restricting all prostitution to within the district walls aligned with a strategy that the centralization of shogunal power. As seen with the policy of alternate attendance, as well as the physical districts within Edo, the Tokugawa shogunate sought to exercise its control and power through control of physical space. *Daimyō* traveling under the alternate attendance had their locations predicted and expected for a majority of their lives: travel to Edo, live in Edo, travel back home from Edo, live at home, and repeat. Merchants of specific trades were assigned physical districts in which they were allowed to sell. *Chōnin* resided inside the town, while farmers and other peasants were located outside the town. Tokugawa shoguns dictated *how* their subjects lived by dictating *where* they lived. The same is done here with Yoshiwara, and it is this first rule which sets the tone. The district would develop on the terms of the shogunate in the place where the shogunate dictated.

The other rules which follow from the first seek to contain the influence that such a district could have on public morality and ideology. Setting limitations on the time spent in the district ensured that the clients could not completely lose themselves in the

¹⁷ Hiromi Sone, "Prostitution and Public Authority in Early Modern Japan," in *Women and Class in Japanese History* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1999), 170.

floating world.¹⁸ They would be forced to return to their daily responsibilities and duties as dictated by the shogunate.¹⁹

Rules three and four functioned as sumptuary laws. These laws reflect the shogunate's favored techniques of delineating class: outward appearance. This was an attempt to stifle any "luxuriousness" that the district could boast. Plain garments and plain architecture ensured that the draw of the district would not be glamour. Finally, rule five promised some possible enforcement of these laws by invoking local shogunal officials.

It is important to notice who the shogunate is directing in the regulations. The proposal to create such a district was submitted by a man, and as such, the shogunate is responding to the man; however, as an essential part of the sex trade, women are implied in each regulation, and some more blatantly than others. For the owners of brothels, the first regulation imposes restraints on where their businesses could operate; but for the prostitutes under the brothel, this regulation literally contained them in this district.

Although it was located in the city of Edo, Yoshiwara was separate from daily life in Edo. At the time Utamaro was creating prints, Yoshiwara was located to the northeast of Edo, outside and out of the way.²⁰ The physical distance reinforced the illusion that to

¹⁸ Davis, 133. Very few men actually had permission to stay in the district overnight, which is part of the reason why Utamaro's series *Twelve Hours of Yoshiwara* were so popular. Utamaro offered a rare, often unattainable experience of the pleasure ward. An experience that would have costed an exorbitant amount of money and social status became available through a less expensive *ukiyo-e* print.

¹⁹ Recall that the shogunate was pushing the ideologies of Buddhism and Neo-Confucianism. Buddhism largely warned against engaging in the world of pleasure and material, while Neo-Confucianism preached a life led by responsibilities and duties. The ideals of the pleasure district, then, went directly against the shogunate's ideology; but this made the marketing of Yoshiwara all the more subversive and fun.

²⁰ Utamaro cleverly names one of his series of women *The Five Colors of Ink in the Northern Country* (*Hokkoku goshiki-zumi*). "Northern country" here means the pleasure district, because it was so far outside the main city. See Davis, 149.

step into Yoshiwara was to step out of Tokugawa Japan. This was furthered by the large, towering walls that surrounded the ward and the single gate, which can be seen in illus. 3 and 4. Additionally, a moat surrounded the ward on all sides.²¹

As Stanley argues, the creation of Yoshiwara was part of a larger effort to define legally and socially the difference between a wife, mother, daughter, and a prostitute.²² As a result of the governmental work to establish such a division, Edo society came to see the prostitutes of Yoshiwara as outside of the home and outside of duty. With this framework already established, it was easy for the merchants of Yoshiwara to market the district as an exotic place free of familial duties: truly, a floating world.²³

Despite the shogunate's efforts to clearly delineate categories of women with social and political connotations, the status of women during the Edo period was complicated. Women had vastly different experiences, depending on where in Japan they were located and in what social class they belonged. Clearly, the wife of a *daimyō* would have little in common with the wife of a rural farmer. In the same way, the experience of a prostitute living and working in the licensed district of Edo could not be surmised from the way in which other women lived and worked.

Prostitutes, however, were part of the demographic of Edo women who worked, and as such, the shogunate tried to define their roles. In general, the Tokugawa

²¹ Cecilia Segawa Seigle, *Yoshiwara: The Glittering World of the Japanese Courtesan* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1993), 53.

²² Stanley, 23.

²³ While the floating world operated as separate from family for men, many of the prostitutes worked for their family. This created an imbalance in the eyes of the government, where the clients (men) had little to no consequences for their behavior or actions in the district. Meanwhile, the prostitutes working for their families were not only responsible to the government through laws but also responsible to their family.

shogunate's attitude towards women was informed by Neo-Confucianism and Buddhism. Because of this, and the combination of the patriarchal feudal system, historians generally consider women's status at its lowest point during the Edo period.²⁴ Yet women still worked and lived in the public spheres of Edo. Yokota Fuyuhiko analyzes the popular book *Onna daigaku* (Greater Learning for Women), published in the eighteenth century, to which he (and others such as Julie Nelson Davis) attributes the negative view of the Edo period. He finds that though the text did promote a traditionally gendered division of labor, that, in its context as a chapter to a larger work, it actually informs the reader of different kinds of women's work, rather than simply outline the domestic work of women. Work as a housewife was, in reality, only one example. He argues, "It would appear that in this period, defining women's work had become a social concern that accompanied a certain degree of social acceptance."²⁵ So the way in which women worked and lived in the public sphere was so important as to characterize and define it in contemporary texts. Furthermore, Yokota argues that women's work was present in society as early as the start of the Edo period.²⁶ *Greater Learning for Women*, then, its first edition published in 1725, was perhaps a late reaction to the widespread phenomenon of working women of which public authority was trying to make sense.

What is especially interesting, however, is his discussion of sexual labor. Yokota looks into popular literature during the period—for example, *The Life of an Amorous*

²⁴ Patricia Fister, *Japanese Women Artists, 1600-1900*, (Lawrence: Spencer Museum of Art, 1988).

²⁵ Fuyuhiko Yokota, "Imagining Working Women in Early Modern Japan." In *Women and Class in Japanese History*, 153-167, ed. by Hitomi Tanomura, Anne Walthall and Wakita Haruko, trans. by Mariko Asano Tamanoi. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 160. Most commonly, women's work was related to textiles or domestic work.

²⁶ Yokota, 162.

Woman—to understand how women’s work was defined in regard to sex. Works like *The Life an Amorous Woman* showed all women’s work to have a sexual aspect.²⁷ *Greater Learning for Women*, however, contradicts this work and further echoes Neo-Confucian morality in its call for women to be modest. Yokota writes that, “This text made a clear distinction between sex and reproduction by delineating the difference between prostitutes and sexual professionals on the one hand and wives and childbearers on the other. The spatial and classificatory institutionalization of licensed prostitution quarters in the early modern era systemized the division between prostitutes and ordinary women.”²⁸ In other words, morality and law came together during the Edo period under the Tokugawa shogunate to classify the prostitute as an entity separate to ordinary women. Perhaps, however, as the sex trade had been rapidly expanding throughout Japan and prostitutes were not uncommon, the shogunal delineation was late and considered seriously.

Whether or not the prostitute existed in a different category of women socially, the classification did not necessarily aggravate her political standing because she was first and foremost a woman. As a woman, she was undeniably of lower standing than her male counterparts. She was a dependent: if not tied to her family, then tied to her husband. Above class or profession, all women shared the stigma of being a woman. This would characterize their public and domestic life.

²⁷ Generally, this was erotic literature. Other works that Yokota discusses are *A Mirror of Customs in the Capital* and *The Great Mirror of the Erotic Way*. See Yokota, 164.

²⁸ Yokota, 165.

CHAPTER THREE: The Women of Edo

Japanese art historian Chino Kaori (1952 – 2001) was a pioneer in the field of feminist art history in Japan. In her essay, “Gender in Japanese Art,” she explores the Heian period (749-1185) through a gendered lens. The comparison of the Heian and Edo periods is particularly interesting because in some ways, they are direct opposites. Where the Edo period culture was dominated by the warrior classes, the Heian period was dominated by the royal court. The Heian period also produced many women artists, most famously, Murasaki Shikobu, author of *The Tale of Genji*. Chino argues, “A group of Japanese men surrounding the emperor skillfully manipulated the ‘masculinity’ of the military ‘men’ by means of the value according to the ‘courtliness’ (*miyabi*), or the ‘feminine,’ and thus controlled Japan culturally.”²⁹ She maintains that those in power could wield both these ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’ behaviors according to need.

With the domination of the military class, we would think that the tendency during this period would be toward the masculine. However, it is precisely the control and order which the Tokugawa shoguns sought to rule with that made the Edo period lean more towards the feminine. As Chino points out, a feminine tendency was not necessarily liberating for women.³⁰ She writes, “Precisely because [pre-Meiji Japan] was a culture that put value on the ‘feminine,’ the social pressure to keep ‘women’ confined to the interior worked all the more strongly. Many beautiful artworks from the past are filled

²⁹ Chino Kaori, “Gender in Japanese Art,” in *Gender and Power in the Japanese Visual* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i press, 2003), 32.

³⁰ Gender theory differentiates between gender and sex.

with ‘femininity,’ and that very beauty may be one of the reasons these works ended up having the function of binding the ‘women’ of Japan so firmly within the ‘feminine.’³¹

So then Tokugawa Japan, in its fostering of feminine values, sought to contain that femininity. Using Chino’s critical lens of Japanese history, we can start to understand the effect that prints like Utamaro’s had on the perception of women, especially prostitutes. It becomes clear, then, that Utamaro’s prints functioned as much as the moat and walls and gate of Yoshiwara did to contain the women within Yoshiwara.

The prints this thesis focuses on are of a specific genre of *ukiyo-e*. They are called *bijin-ga*, meaning “pictures of beautiful people.” Utamaro specialized in these types of prints, which typically featured the prostitutes of Yoshiwara. While all *ukiyo-e* had some form of marketing attached to it, *bijin-ga*’s marketing was two-fold: first, the prints promoted the *ukiyo* culture of Yoshiwara; second, the prints promoted the prostitute’s services. As such, *bijin-ga* told specific narratives about the prostitutes, as they actively lived in the floating world. The prints are, then, necessarily highly idealized. Prostitutes are shown in beautiful, patterned robes, happy and smiling, enjoying the luxuries that Yoshiwara supplied. Often, they were depicted as powerful, in a way. Recall the holy man Kume falling down at the sight of woman’s leg.³²

It is tempting to see the prints of women as uplifting in terms of their status. From the artwork, advertisements, and writings of that time, one could surmise that women essentially ran Yoshiwara. Buddhism, of course, warned against the temptations that only

³¹ Chino, 32.

³² See note 5.

women incited, and Neo-Confucianism insisted on a set of moral codes for women specifically. The *bijin-ga* prints elevated their status as people so that consumers of the prints knew who these women were.³³ At a first glance, it might seem that the plight of the woman in Yoshiwara was nonexistent. It is a narrative to that we can easily fall into. It is this world which was imported into our Western minds in the form of geishas. Strong, powerful women who do not repress their sexuality but instead flaunt it. Almost certainly, this was part of the narrative the floating world wished to create.

The reality behind Yoshiwara was not what the prints claimed. Many, if not all, the prostitutes working in Yoshiwara were from families of the lower socioeconomic ranking. Oftentimes, parents would sell their daughters to brothel keepers in order to sustain themselves.³⁴ From a young age, often 12 years old, the female body was seen as a commodity—something that could be bought or sold. Boys would grow into men who could take on their father's trade and be head of a family unit, but girls—as a result of the ideologies of Buddhism and Neo-Confucianism and the realities of the Edo society—would eventually be married off into another family. While women did work during the Edo period, especially in the lower socioeconomic classes, their career opportunities were limited to specific sectors.³⁵ Prostitution was, frankly, for some women, just another career.

³³ Tatsuō Akai, "The Common People and Painting," in *Tokugawa Japan*. (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1990).

³⁴ Davis, 115-168. See also Stanley, 20-100.

³⁵ Most commonly, women would work in textiles. See Yokota, 160.

Prostitution could not be considered “just another career,” however,” despite the casualness with which contemporary literature listed it as a profession. The working conditions of the brothels in the sanctioned pleasure district were inhumane. Prostitutes were constantly malnourished as their meals were meager. Working conditions were so bad that many died very young from diseases. The average age the prostitutes survived to was 21, according to inscriptions on the memorial at Jokānji, the burial site for the Yoshiwara prostitutes.³⁶ The women, then, were not sent to Yoshiwara to achieve fame and fortune; they were not even sent there to be able to work sustainably and support themselves. Instead, they were sexually exploited while being forced to upkeep the “glamour” of the floating world; and there was no guarantee that they would be released, even if they rose to fame and popularity.³⁷

In addition to the conditions in which the prostitutes lived and worked, they had essentially no autonomy. The brothel paid them a stipend, but prostitutes had to rent their rooms. High ranking prostitutes had to pay more for the luxury rooms. It was possible for a prostitute to buy out her contract, but extremely difficult.

In these conditions, the prostitute could not have held any autonomy.³⁸ Whether or not the prostitute truly saw it as an act of filial duty, the brothels used coercion to keep them in service for as long as possible through the contract system. Ultimately, the women of Yoshiwara had no power, both in social and economic matters.

³⁶ Sone, 178.

³⁷ There are some instances where prostitutes could go onto to become concubines of a daimyo, or the wife of an upperclassman (if he could buy out her contract).

³⁸ Sone, 178. The lure of the prostitutes of Yoshiwara did not rely on sex alone. Many men in arranged marriages would seek out romance, or even love, in the brothels of Yoshiwara. If a client could not buy out the prostitute’s contract, double suicide was a typical outplaying of the situation. See also Davis, 116-17.

The interaction between women and the shogunate were firm measures of confinement and control. The women would have felt this through the restrictions placed on their physical movements: i.e., being forbidden to leave the district after a certain time and being unable to buy out their contract with the money they made. The relationship between the abstract idea of the patriarchal, feudal government and the very real women of Yoshiwara translated into a struggle for survival for the prostitutes.

This abstracted power struggle, between women and shogunal restrictions, manifested into interactions between women in Yoshiwara and their clients. Even if shogunal directions were largely ignored, political power still carried some breadth, especially when it came to men and women. The patrons of Yoshiwara were politically and socially the superiors of the prostitutes, thus a prostitute could not act freely. Furthermore, with the district actually sanctioned by the shogunate, the actions of the men in Yoshiwara were allowed. It was expected that married men would frequent the district so much so that "...the marriage pattern that came to be established was in fact polygamous; any man could get a woman unilaterally as long as he had the money."³⁹ The economic disparity, as well, paved the way for the wealthy townsmen and merchants who would later come to be the main clients of Yoshiwara, at the time when Utamaro was printing.

³⁹ Sone, 181.

It is important to remember that the population of Edo was disproportionately male. Any form of rebellion in the pleasure quarter⁴⁰ was by and for men. With the regulations in place by the shogunate surrounding the quarters, women rarely, if ever, had the chance to participate in class-defying social interactions.⁴¹ Men from lower classes who were clients of the quarter had economic power. Despite an acceptance of women's work, their specializations were limited to industries tied to domestic work, and the work they did were considered amateur.⁴² Women's literacy did not necessarily rise, and though high-ranking prostitutes were educated, any poems they composed were in order to keep up the illusions of romance that the quarter supplied.⁴³

Art historian Julie Nelson Davis summarizes the situation of the women who found themselves entrapped in this floating world: "In Tokugawa society, as much and possibly even more than in any other patriarchal society, a separately constructed female voice, and female gaze, did not and could not exist, for it did not and could not command the terms of power."⁴⁴ As much as we want to believe that these women, who are the subject of famous prints distributed all over the world, held influence and authority in a culture that was actually built on them, the reality of the society was that the power hierarchy rejected women.

⁴⁰ I am using "rebellion" lightly here as the pleasure quarter did not attract those willing to change the Tokugawa society for the betterment of the lower classes; simply put, clients were at the entertainment district to forget about the Tokugawa shogunate.

⁴¹ Even Kabuki theatre, which first developed as theatre put on by the prostitutes, eventually outlawed women and became a male-only pastime.

⁴² "What I want to emphasize here, however, is that, on the one hand, this 'women's work,' instead of being done by wives to maintain their families' self-sufficiency, now integrated women into the work force, into a social system of production and marketing. On the other hand, it was denigrated because subcontracted labor was considered inferior to work done by men; it was so-called second-class labor." Yokota, 163.

⁴³ If men could not find romance in their arranged marriages, they turned to Yoshiwara.

⁴⁴ Davis, 194.

The prints did not inspire awe at their power; instead, as Chino suggests, they further entrenched the women into stereotypical feminine roles. And Utamaro, whose *bijin-ga* prints sought to display the beauty of the women of the pleasure quarter, is perhaps one of the most influential perpetrators in this process.

CHAPTER FOUR: Women as Subjects of Utamaro's *Bijin-ga* Prints

Bijin-ga prints, with their subject matter the women who worked and lived in Yoshiwara, played an important role in the complicated status of these women. It is important to note then who exactly was representing these women. As the creator of meaning,⁴⁵ where was Utamaro situated in the political stratum?

Kitagawa Utamaro was born in 1753. Not much is known about him other than what was in the public records. At the center of the newest mode of communication, Utamaro could essentially construct any information about himself. In 1782, he was formally introduced through a print as a new *ukiyo-e* artist. Utamaro started out as a painter of nature, but he would go on to master the genre of *bijin-ga*, even having his style set the standard for other *bijin-ga* artists who followed.⁴⁶ *Ukiyo-e* was a highly collaborative process that involved multiple different disciplines, and from the beginning of his career, Utamaro was working with some of the most popular publishers.

As the artist, Utamaro designed the prints. He had to adhere, however, to the regulations installed by the Tokugawa shogunate on publishing. Certain subjects were forbidden by the Tokugawa shogunate and the collaborative nature of woodblock printing was conducive to the measures which ensured that the censorship laws were followed. The relationship between the printers and the shogunate was tense, as artists, including Utamaro, were always looking to push the boundaries of what they would be allowed to

⁴⁵ Per Stuart Hall's theory of representation, Utamaro as the representor creates the meaning of the prostitutes of Yoshiwara in how he chooses to depict them.

⁴⁶ Davis, *Utamaro and The Spectacle of Beauty*, Chapter 1: "Constructing the Artist Known as Utamaro."

print. Utamaro's prints of prostitutes in particular often clashed with these regulations outlawing "depraved or divergent opinion on the subjects of Confucianism, Buddhism, Shintoism, medicine, or poetry" and "amorous books."⁴⁷ Although Utamaro's only real brush with the censorship laws involved the printing of one of Tonkawa Ieyasu's family members, his *bijin-ga* prints participated in the playfully rebellious aspects of Edo culture.

So it was through regulations and rules that the Tokugawa shogunate attempted to have control over the distribution of information. As Tsuji Nobou suggests, however, *ukiyo-e*, and subsequently *bijin-ga* as one of its iterations, was an art form for the townspeople of Edo.⁴⁸ In his essay, Akai demonstrates the pervasiveness of these prints in everyday life. The prints cost roughly the price of a soba bowl, so they were affordable.⁴⁹ He explains that they were a common collector's item for children, and that the artists were famous.⁵⁰ He points out the prints featured in other prints. For example, some of Hiroshige's prints from his *Sixty-Nine Stations Along the Kiso Highway* show shops with *ukiyo-e* prints lining the walls (see illus. 5). We see then that the prints were items with which the people of Edo regularly interacted.

For artists like Hokusai and Hiroshige, whose prints featured famous places or landscapes, the collection of these prints was common enough to be featured as a part of

⁴⁷ Davis, 13.

⁴⁸ See note 11.

⁴⁹ Of course, certain prints that perhaps featured very famous prostitutes or used special materials, like mica, would have had a higher price. But for the most part, the prints were casual purchases. See Akai, 184-5.

⁵⁰ Akai, 188.



Illustration 5: Hiroshige, Tairu post station, from the series *Sixty-nine Stations along the Kiso Highway*, 1834-43, 38 x 25 cm.

the scene. It is less clear how exactly women and children interacted with *bijin-ga* prints, whose artists targeted a specific audience: men who could be potential clients of Yoshiwara. After all, the general purpose of the *bijin-ga* prints were to advertise the services of the prostitutes.⁵¹ Utamaro's *bijin-ga* prints are more subtle in their advertisements and, instead of emphasizing brothels and prices, plays to the general glamour of the quarters rather than the glamour of specific prostitutes. In illus. 5, we see prints of women in Utamaro's signature drawing style. It can be surmised then that while

⁵¹ David Pollack puts it bluntly: "The question of which women were available in which brothels—the real subject of those lovely *bijinga* as well as the ever-popular guides to the quarter—is after all simply a narrower form of the broader question that concerned all consumers of which goods were available in which shops." See Pollack, 75.

these prints held specific meanings for men, they could also act in a more abstract way as emblems of the floating world culture. Perhaps it is a duality like this—as well as the separation between the floating world and the world of Edo commoners—that afforded Utamaro’s prints their ubiquity. Either way, because the prints were so popular and common, they undoubtedly influenced the way the women of Yoshiwara were perceived.

Utamaro, like many *ukiyo-e* artists, worked in series. The serial nature of his prints reinforces the idea that they were collectibles. The first of these series with which we can start to unravel the representation of the prostitutes of Yoshiwara is *Twelve Hours in the Yoshiwara* (*Seirō jūni toki tsuzuki*) published between 1794 and 1795. Here, Utamaro claims to have access to the private aspects of the prostitute’s day which clients did not see in their visits to Yoshiwara. The series functioned as a means to entice his largely male audience into visiting the pleasure quarter. Let us examine the first print of the series, “The Hour of the Snake” (illus. 6), which would have been 10 A.M..

At 10 A.M., the courtesan has just finished her bath and is drying her hair. Take note of the traditionally *ukiyo-e* characteristics in the print. The negative space both draws our attention to the women and places the scene outside of everyday life. Where we might see the wall of the room or even the bathtub from which the courtesan emerges, we instead see a background left blank. Both courtesans’ clothes are patterned intricately, with saturated blues, reds, and greens.

Utamaro’s subjects, however, are not neutral or universal symbols such as Mount Fuji in “The Great Wave.” The prostitutes, not only in an unstable sociopolitical position within the Tokugawa structure, carry the connotation of the floating world and the

possibilities of sexual services that come from the floating world. Utamaro's purpose in drawing these women is, again, to market the allure of the pleasure quarter. The male presence is a simultaneous reference: it signals Utamaro as the master artist of the women, but also the male viewer who could visit the quarter and use the prostitutes. In her essay "Narrative Cinema and Visual Pleasure," Laura Mulvey explains the male gaze as threefold: first, the producer; second, the audience; and third, the protagonist.⁵² While she characterizes cinema in the golden age of Hollywood, we can identify the three gazes in Utamaro's prints as well. First, the artist as the producer. Utamaro and other professionals which created the prints and distributed them transferred their own view of the prostitutes of Yoshiwara into the work. Similarly, the audience is the male consumers of the prints who could visit the quarter. Finally, Utamaro inserts himself as the male protagonist, although he remains anonymous. Through this anonymity, however, he allows the male viewer to easily insert himself into the role of the male protagonist, something that Mulvey's cinema could not do as blatantly.

Davis points out a key element present here and in every subsequent print in the series: the hinting of a male presence. She writes, "The image is designed to suggest an observed moment, as though Utamaro himself were present when the woman returned from her bath."⁵³ Indeed, the gaze of both women is off to the side, indicating a presence

⁵² Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation* (New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984).

⁵³ Davis, 120.

not depicted in the print which draws their attention. The action of the print, then, is transferred to this off-center presence, and the two women become merely reactants.

Mulvey explains: “As the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist, he



Illustration 6: Utamaro, “The Hour of the Snake,” (Mi no koku), from the series *Twelve Hours in the Yoshiwara* (*Seirō jūni toki tsuzuki*), 1794-5, woodblock print, 38.1 x 25.4 cm.

projects his look onto that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence.”⁵⁴ In “The Hour of the Snake,” the male protagonist is this off-screen presence. The viewer, in this case, the male consumers of the prints, can then easily imagine himself as that anonymous presence

⁵⁴ Mulvey, 367.

commanding the attention of the women in the print. Thus, the sense of omnipotence is achieved for the observer.

The negative space in the print then does not just draw our attention to the women; it displaces them for the male imagination. The lack of representation of physical objects or places allows the viewer to place these prostitutes at any of the brothels in the floating world—which ever one he may choose to patronize. Furthermore, with the male audience in mind, the women's most private moments become an opportunity to show off the parts of her body associated with sex. The women are transformed into devices for the male viewer's pleasure. Parallely, he acquires a sense of power through his exclusive position, as he possesses the prostitute in a way no other client does: in the moments where she is supposedly alone and not being compensated.

Already we can see a disregard for the women. In the prints that follow chronologically, we see a hint of this anonymous male presence. In the "Hour of the Horse," he is represented through a letter, which the courtesan reads; and similarly, represented in the action of the other courtesan fixing her hair. Each subsequent print in some way asserts the presence of an anonymous, more powerful male figure, either in physical objects or gazes off to the side. What these prints all have in common is the deference to a more powerful figure.

Utamaro continues to depict the prostitute at various parts on the day on a 2 hour interval in accordance with the zodiac clock. By the hour of the monkey, approximately 4 P.M., the prostitute is walking to meet her client. At the hour of the dog, 8 P.M., she is entertaining at the party. We eventually arrive at "The Hour of the Rat," (illus. 7) around

midnight. At this time, the prostitute has entertained and paraded, and she is preparing for the sexual act. Notice again the negative space and bright colors which draw attention to the prostitute. With a minimalistic background, the viewer notices not only the hair and the clothes of the prostitute, but the action she takes to remove her robes.



Illustration 7: Utamaro, “The Hour of the Rat,” (Ne no koku), from the series *Twelve Hours in the Yoshiwara* (*Seirō jūni toki tsuzuki*), 1794-5, woodblock print, 38.1 x 25.4 cm.

The woman standing and untying her robes in this print is the *yūjo*, a name for the highest-ranking courtesans in the district. Her status is shown through the elaborate accessories in her hair and the bright colors of her clothing. The woman folding up the male client’s robes is a *shinzō*, or, a lower-ranking prostitute that acts as an assistant to the *yūjo*.⁵⁵ The disparity in rank between the two women is shown also

⁵⁵ Davis, 133.

through the composition. The *yūjo* stands; and, although she is leaning slightly, she stands as tall as the print allows. The *shinzō* kneels, relegated to the right corner of the print. A clear power dynamic is outlined between the courtesans, an homage to the way in which Edo society functioned. The *yūjo*, however, is not the most powerful person depicted.

Although the male client is not explicitly drawn, he is present. If we breakdown the print into parts, we can see the compositional focus on the robes of the man. First, the standing prostitute's body curves almost unnaturally, framing the center of the print. Her



Illustration 8: Utamarō, “The Hour of the Ox,” (Ushi no koku), from the series *Twelve Hours in the Yoshiwara* (*Seirō jūni toki tsuzuki*), 1794-5, woodblock print, 37.1 x 24.4 cm.

body and her gaze points us to the robes which the *shinzō* folds.

Similarly, despite the *shinzō* kneeling, she too curves towards the robes which she holds. The attention from the two women are on the robes, signaling the most powerful figure in this scene.

The male presence has been alluded to throughout the series, but it is perhaps with “The Hour of the Rat” that we see the culmination of his journey to the pleasure quarter. In the context of the other prints of the

Twelve Hours in the Yoshiwara, his gender and powerful ranking cannot be questioned. Immediately following, “The Hour of the Ox,” (illus. 8) the woman exits the sexual encounter. Davis writes, “The *yūjo*’s apparent exhaustion and the informality of the scene are covers for the real narrative here: the privileged and complete possession of her body.”⁵⁶ What Utamaro chooses to depict in the encounter between the client and the prostitute is a decidedly male narrative. The prostitute, in all prints in the series, has been shown to be merely a means to an end; and even in the end, her body shows not satisfaction that would come from a mutually beneficial sexual encounter, but exhaustion from being used. Even in this state, Utamaro seizes the opportunity to further objectify her: note her leg shown through her robes and recall the print of the holy man falling from grace.⁵⁷ Perhaps “The Hour of the Ox” is meant to signify male virility, but through the lens of feminism, it simply shows the desperate need to dominate and control women, carried out through the physical acts against prostitutes.

The prints in this series, then, which claim to give insight to the women’s lives, only perpetuate a preconceived idea surrounding the floating world. Utamaro reinforces the power hierarchy which clients understood and makes it a part of the courtesan’s identity. What lies in the appeal of a *yūjo* was perhaps not just her beauty, but the ease with which she was dominated and controlled. This is reflected in the prints of *Twelve Hours in the Yoshiwara* through the definition and representation of the prostitute in

⁵⁶ Davis, 133.

⁵⁷ See illus. 1.

relation to the male client. The subject of the prints turns out not to be the prostitutes, but the anonymous and off-screen male protagonist, who instigates all encounters.

In addition to the imagined physical possession of the prostitute's body, the women in Utamaro's prints are further subjugated through a voyeuristic male gaze. Directly in line with the purpose of the series—to expose the private moments of the prostitutes—the voyeuristic male gaze seeks to possess the woman beyond her body. Davis expands this idea to the series as a whole. “The figures in each scene are organized to encourage the viewer to imagine himself before the picture; in each, the objects of his gaze are turned to three-quarter view so that he may view them all the better, and his presence as a voyeur is never directly challenged.”⁵⁸ The three-quarter view is present in *The Hour of the Rat*, giving particular emphasis to the curvature of the *yūjo*'s body. This voyeuristic positioning grants the power of looking to the owner of the print: the man who hopes to be in the position of the alluded male protagonist or has been in the position of and hopes to reminiscence. It is significant that the courtesan does not meet the gaze of the print owner. She is completely unaware of her being looked at. It is this undetected gaze that adds another dimension of domination of the prostitute.⁵⁹

Consequently, the male viewer occupies two distinct spaces of power in the print: first, he is the undetected observer; second, he is the male client. Across both roles, the male viewer objectifies and subjugates. The woman is dehumanized by observation, sexually objectified by voyeurism, physically dominated by the implied sexual act, and

⁵⁸ Davis, 123.

⁵⁹ *Ways of Seeing*, “Episode 2,” written by John Berger, prod. Mike Dibb. Aired January 15, 1972 on BBC Two, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00drs00>.

controlled by Edo hierarchical power. With this, Utamaro strips the courtesans of any power she might possess as a high-ranking *yūjo*.

Another one of Utamaro's print series furthers the otherizing of women by sorting them into archetypes. These prints depict women both inside and outside Yoshiwara, so although each of these women might not be sexually available as licensed prostitutes, the connotation of sexual opportunity continues to exist in the prints.⁶⁰ Utamaro presents this series, *Ten Physiognomic Studies of Women* (*Fujin sogaku juttai*) (1791-2), as a scientific



Illustration 9: Utamaro, "Blowing on a Glass Toy," from the series *Ten Physiognomic Studies of Women* (*Fujin sogaku juttai*), 1792-3, woodblock print, 38.8 x 25.7 cm.

study of women.⁶¹ The title of this series suggests an unbiased observer—namely, the artist Utamaro—who merely seeks to understand women through observation. Much like *The Twelve Hours in the Yoshiwara*, however, the male observer is more voyeuristic than academic. The tone is light-hearted, meant to serve as a funny impersonation of a scientific observer; however, this narrative proves dangerously destructive to the perception of the women. Illustrations 9 and 10 are from this series. Illus. 9 is titled "Blowing on a Glass

⁶⁰ I refer back to the discussion of women's work.

⁶¹ Davis explains the use of the word "physiognomic" as indicative of the influence of Chinese portraiture. See Davis, *Utamaro and the Spectacle of Beauty*, Chapter 2: "'Pictures of Beauties' and Other Social Physiognomies."

Toy” and depicts a courtesan looking off camera, blowing into a poppin (glass toy). Illus. 10 is titled “The Light-Hearted Type.”

In both “Blowing on a Glass Toy,” and “The Light-Hearted Type,” certain parts of the women are sexualized, and with the absence of a directed gaze, they are reduced to mere parts of a body. The women look away, seemingly unaware that they are being watched. Utamaro places the male viewer in the powerful position of the observer; the



Illustration 10: Utamaro, “The Light-Hearted Type” (Uwaki no sō) from the series *Ten Physiognomic Studies of Women* (*Fujin sōgaku juttai*), 1792-3, woodblock print, 37.8 x 25.1 cm.

women in the print subject to the undetected gaze.

In “Blowing on a Glass Toy,” the courtesan brings the glass toy delicately to her lips, emphasizing her mouth. In “The Light-Hearted Type,” the courtesan is so absent-minded that she does not notice her clothing has slipped down to reveal her breast. And while Utamaro evokes the nature of an observational scientist, the voyeuristic nature of the gaze plays into the pleasure of the male viewer, much like in “The Hour of the Rat.”

Again, the different gazes in these prints are crucial. Something commands the attention of the women off to the side, drawing their attention away from the observer (both Utamaro, the artists, and the male consumers). Notice the positioning of the women's bodies. In both prints, the women have twisted their heads to direct their gaze off center, conveniently revealing their necks and collarbones for the observer. The woman, then, is not poised to answer a question or call out to someone; instead, she is posed.

Ten Physiognomic Studies of Women exposes a trend in Utamaro's prints that categorically define the women he represents. The prints display personality traits or characteristics of the women, which he reveals through visual cues.⁶² In this series, the sorting is obvious, through titles; however, in other prints, Utamaro continues to "codify" the women through symbols.

Take a moment to look at the prints discussed thus far. What are the defining features of the women? How do you differentiate between them? In Utamaro's prints, the faces of the women remain unimportant. Compared to other forms in the prints, and in particular the women's bodies, the lines which outline their faces are less bold, and more suggestive, creating an easily moldable face to suit the male viewer's imagination. Look closely at "The Hour of the Sheep" from *The Twelve Hours in Yoshiwara* (illus. 11). In this print, three women of Yoshiwara, each a different rank, are shown. How Utamaro identifies the women, however, are not as separate persons. He categorizes the women

⁶² Davis explains that the prints even go so far as to make moral judgements on the women, as well, clearly judging them as the types of women you would not want to engage with.

into their ranking as prostitutes. Furthermore, he displays this ranking by their hair and clothes alone. Notice the similarity in their faces: their nose and eye shape are indistinguishable from each other. Even the young girl to the far left, who is a child, is drawn with the same facial features.



Illustration 11: Utamaro, “The Hour of the Sheep,” (Hitsuji no koku), from the series *Twelve Hours in the Yoshiwara* (*Seirō jūni toki tsuzuki*), 1794-5, woodblock print, 38.1 x 25.4 cm.

This is not an artist being lazy. We need only look at the intricate designs and layers of clothing the women wear to realize the generic faces are an intentional choice. What Utamaro appoints to hold significance for the women is their hair and clothing.⁶³ The women depicted then are not individuals who belong to a certain rank; rather, they are representative figures of each rank: a generic placeholder for the specific women that a male client could buy time with.

⁶³ In Edo society, hierarchies were made known by visual cues, namely, the types of materials and clothes that you could wear. Thus, clothes as signifiers for the ranking of the prostitutes would not have surprised the consumers of Utamaro’s prints. In fact, this would have been expected.



Illustration 12: Utamaro, “Three Beauties of the Present Day (Tōjin san bijin): Tomimoto Toyohina, Naniwaya Kita, Takashima Okisa,” 1793, woodblock print, 37 x 25 cm.

Arguably Utamaro’s most famous print today, and by far one of the most popular during his lifetime, is *Three Beauties of the Present Day* (*Tōji san bijin*): Tomimoto Toyohima, Naniwaya Kita, Takashima Hisa (illus. 12). In *Three Beauties of the Present Day*, we see many devices that Utamaro employed in his other series: the unidentifiable faces, off-center gazes, and the patterned clothes that identify the women. *Three Beauties*, however, raises new questions that push the boundaries of the women’s identity.

Here, Utamaro has named the women which he depicts. The women are not the Yoshiwara prostitutes but rather working women in the public eye of Edo society.

Tomimoto Toyohima is a geisha, Naniwaya Okita is a teahouse waitress, and Takashima Ohisa is a rice-cracker shop girl.

Even in *Three Beauties*, in which Utamaro means to represent specific individuals with jobs outside of prostitution, he distinguishes the women through symbols. Toyohima is marked by the primrose flowers on her clothes; Okita wears a crest with three oak



Illustration 13: Utamaro, Takashima Ohisa, 1788-98, woodblock print, 37.4 x 24.9 cm.

leaves; and Ohisa, both in this print and in others in which she is featured, is signified by the fan with the paulownia leaf.⁶⁴ Here, their facial features are slightly altered: Ohisa's nose has slightly more curvature. This is not consistent with Utamaro's other depictions of her, however (illus. 13). Thus, the slight alteration in Utamaro's design is just a method to differentiate between the other two women in the print alone.

Typical of *bijin-ga*, the male gaze acts in the same way as the other prints. All women

look elsewhere, so that the observer can observe undetected. Rather than taking steps towards a more truthful representation of the women, Utamaro seems to take a step backward with *Three Beauties* with codified signals to identify the women. Overtly, he represents them based on appearance, hair, and clothes. Less explicitly, by representing them in the *bijin-ga* genre, he is putting them on display for the male viewer, not only for the viewer's pleasure but also a means of advertisement for the places at which they worked. Utamaro forgoes any realistic representation of these women and instead plays into the creation of an archetypal woman.

⁶⁴ Davis, 107.



Illustration 14: Atsunobo, Kano, "The Three Vinegar Tasters," latter half of the 17th to latter half of the 18th century, ink and light color on paper, 115 x 50 cm.

Three Beauties also brings into question the way in which Utamaro and other *ukiyo-e* artists chose to show the “success” of these woman.⁶⁵ The positioning of the women—two flanking the one—was a nod towards the triumvirate Buddhas, a concept and image that Edo society would have picked up on easily because of the shogunate’s endorsement of Buddhism. The grouping of three is also a nod to the story of the three vinegar tasters, a traditional Chinese painting and allegory that represented the main philosophies of China: Daoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism (illus. 14). Utamaro does not dance around the ideological clashing of *ukiyo* and the shogunate; instead, he satirizes it. It was perhaps this deadpan, point-blank kind of humor that appealed to the consumers of Utamaro’s prints; and in this way, the

prints partook in the subtle rebellion that the culture of *ukiyo* adopted.

The comparison Utamaro draws, however, between the women and revered men in Asian philosophy and religion is made at the expense of the women. If the print is meant to be mocking, Utamaro plays into the cultural narrative of the place of a woman

⁶⁵ Here, I mean success sarcastically of course, since the fame achieved by these women were based on arbitrary ideals of beauty.

as outside the realm of men of wisdom. The print becomes funny because of this implicit assumption: these women are not on the level of these men and never will be. If the print is meant to sincerely acknowledge their beauty, Utamaro has reduced their achievements in life to their appearance.

This shows a greater trend found in *ukiyo-e* prints in depicting women in the public sphere. When a woman is represented—whether she is a prostitute or a waitress—she is sexualized. Her image does not resemble her in likeness. Her defining characteristics are those which display her social rank, namely her hair and clothes and symbols which point to the places where she works. Her fame and popularity come from this alone. Even when she does not work in a job where she is expected to sell her body, this remains her acclaimed feature.

In “Artist, Block Carver, Applying Sizing,” (illus. 15) Utamaro draws the women



Illustration 15: Utamaro, "Artist, Block Carver, Applying Sizing," (Eshi, hangashi dosa-biki), from the series *The Cultivation of Brocade Prints, A Famous Product of Edo* (*Edo meibutsu nishik-e kosaku*), 1805, woodblock print, 38.5 x 74.4 cm.

featured in *bijin-ga* as the creators of their own images, taking on the roles of Utamaro and the publishers and carvers he would work with. At first glance, we see women creating art independently, the print devoid of any male presence; however, upon closer examination, we understand the print is merely another creative way to objectify the women. They seemingly perform the work of a publishing firm but are instead put on display.

Images like these of women in the public sphere performing some kind of work complicate the social acceptance of women's work in Edo society.⁶⁶ Yokota reveals through literary texts that women did enter the public sphere as workers. In regard to prostitution, the Tokugawa shogunate sanctioned the work under various regulations. Yet the work women performed, when depicted in *ukiyo-e*, was sexualized even when the women were not sex workers. On what basis, then, was women's work accepted? Utamaro's depictions would tell us if the work or the depiction of the work benefited male pleasure, then it was accepted.

We can try to understand this through Chino's work on gender theory and Japanese art. In deconstructing the role of gender in the Heian period, she identifies the Japanese masculine quality as "public" and the feminine quality as "private."⁶⁷ When women stepped out of the home and domestic sphere as workers in the public eye—the prostitutes of Yoshiwara, tea shop waitresses—the easy sorting of male-masculine and female-feminine was threatened. Thus, the effort to contain women within femininity was

⁶⁶ See note 24.

⁶⁷ Chino, 21.

redoubled. This manifested in eroticized literature like *The Life of an Amorous Woman*, but especially in *bijin-ga* prints. It manifested in the way which the Tokugawa shogunate tried to control and contain the work of prostitutes. The end result is a society that under the pretense of championing beauty, further entrenched women into stereotypically feminine roles and refused to take their work in the public sphere seriously. When women stepped out of the domestic realm, they were on display for the male gaze.

CONCLUSION

John Berger begins the second episode of “Ways of Seeing” with the following: “Men dream of women. Women dream of themselves being dreamt of. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at.”⁶⁸

John Berger, of course, investigates the European nude, which is clearly a different genre from *bijin-ga*; yet underneath vast differences in culture, purpose, and artistic methods, can we not say that both genres put women on display for men’s pleasure? *Bijin-ga* sought by definition to display beautiful women of Yoshiwara and Edo. Although the women are not naked, Utamaro puts eroticized zones of the women’s bodies on display for the pleasure of the man. *Bijin-ga*, then, is perhaps one iteration of the “nude.”

The Twelve Hours in the Yoshiwara and other series certainly allude to an ever-present male gaze. In other words, the women are always being looked at. The women encountered through *bijin-ga*, while in one of the lowest strata of society, were known in Edo and beyond as ideals of beauty, as the genre *bijin-ga* literally designates them as beautiful. As Pollack’s essay suggests, these were standards of beauty which shop owners, artists, and publishers marketed. He implies two distinct audiences: men, to whom sex was being marketed, and women, to whom beauty through make-up products

⁶⁸ *Ways of Seeing*, “Episode 2,” written by John Berger, prod. Mike Dibb. Aired January 15, 1972 on BBC Two, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00drs00>.

were being marketed.⁶⁹ The omnipresence of *ukiyo-e* and *bijin-ga*, then, ensured that women during the Edo period indeed watched themselves being looked at.

The prints then must play a role in how women in Edo society saw themselves; but here is where *bijin-ga* and the European nude diverge. Rather than fine art created for an elite class, *ukiyo-e* prints were Edo society's form of news and media. Cheaply bought and widely distributed, *bijin-ga* prints had a kind of accessibility that Japanese residents hadn't encountered before. As Utamaro was a popular artist during his lifetime, his representations of women were, of course, incredibly influential.

Stuart Hall's theory of representation in the media argues it is the media which assigns meaning to people or events through their representation of those people and events.⁷⁰ Utamaro and *bijin-ga* prints plays this crucial role of representation in Edo. In his prints, Utamaro assigns meaning to the women he draws, and this meaning is dispersed to the people of Edo. As the new art form for the people of Edo, *ukiyo-e* prints were all the more potent as creators of meaning since their reach went beyond an elite class and actually pervaded everyday Edo society.

Utamaro's prints, then, would have had real effects on how contemporary Japanese perceived women in the public sphere of society. We see echoes of this in Yokota's work on working women in Edo,⁷¹ but more research needs to be done in this

⁶⁹ See note 11.

⁷⁰ *Stuart Hall: Representation & the Media*, dir. Mary Patierno, Sanjay Talreja. (Media Education Foundation, 1997), <https://regis.kanopy.com/video/stuart-hall-representation-media>.

⁷¹ See note 41.

area to really understand how women existed both as subjects and consumers of to these widely distributed *bijin-ga* prints.

What we can see, however, is the way we interact with these prints today. In 1853, with Commodore Perry of the United States forcibly opening trade with Japan to Western powers, *ukiyo-e* prints were suddenly brought out of Japan. Many prominent artists, including Van Gogh, took inspiration from the prints in a movement called *japonisme* in France. Utamaro's depictions of women moved beyond Japan and into the Western world.

As Western artists and consumers, our own interpretation of the prints is skewed with more stereotypes and prejudice than just those against women working in the public eye. The prints are taken outside of their historical context and simply called "Japanese." The subjects of the prints, namely the women, then bear the meaning of "Japanese," and their complicated role in Edo society is left behind. In the art world, the focus is on the elements of art which inspired Western art: the negative space, indifference to perspective, and bright colors with intricate patterning.

As Chino argues, however, this type of history is only reflective of the dominant narrative. For Western art history, the prints are Orientalized, and what becomes important is how the Western male artist appropriated and used the "Japanese" painting style. We see then easily that in each iteration, the meaning of the works is reduced. For Japanese art history, this is the male observer of Utamaro. His status as an innovative artist often eclipses the reality behind the floating world which he depicted.

Yet as people who live in a separate society and a separate time, we first come into contact with these works through those skewed lenses, inherited by the people with the power to represent the women of Edo how they want. Is it our responsibility to understand those skewed lenses? And if so, how do we justify this to those outside of the art world?

Chino received criticism from prominent Japanese art institutions and leaders for applying Western concepts and theories to Japanese art.⁷² She argues, however, that Japanese art should not remain off-limits to a Western scrutiny, or else it becomes enclosed in its own feedback loop. In her essay “Gender in Japanese Art,” she writes:

It is time to open our eyes to the present state of the world, move with the trends both inside and outside Japan, and begin to experiment to create a new discourse for Japanese art history. In place of the previous ‘universal’ and monolithic art history, we need to construct a new pluralistic art history.⁷³

Theories from Western writers and thinkers like Laura Mulvey and Stuart Hall are not attempting perpetuate a Western narrative. Applying these theories and similar ones are not meant to impose a Western understanding onto the work. Rather, they are tools to dismantle those narratives. In using these theories, we can begin to understand the complex systems of power behind works of art.

If we want to participate in and foster a more inclusive art world, we should begin by dissecting, analyzing, and understanding these narratives. Ignorance only serves to perpetuate the narratives that are in place—the narratives that harm those outside of the

⁷² Ayako Kano, “Women? Japan? Art? Chino Kaori and the Feminist Art History Debates” in *Review of Japanese Culture and Society*, vol. 15 (Honolulu: University of Hawai’I Press, 2003), 27. She mentions curators and art historians Mitsuda Yuri, Inaga Shigemi, Ogawa Hitomitsu (University of Tokyo), and Kano Kiroyuki (Kyoto National Museum).

⁷³ Chino, 19.

dominant group and play into a stereotyped understanding of the world. We should go beyond easy acceptance of the artist's understanding: what was the understanding of the subjects featured in the work?

Adopting such a critical lens is, I think, necessary to create the “pluralistic art history” that Chino writes about. There is a power in reuniting the prints and their historical context. In the research done to understand the actual experiences and conditions of the women during this time, we combat the Western narrative which merely sees these works as “Japanese.” We can dismantle the two-dimensional archetypal women depicted in the prints, which exist for men's pleasure, and uncover the individuality and humanity of the women portrayed.

This applies beyond pieces of art as well, as Stuart Hall suggests. Art, while we typically don't think of it as such, is a part of the media representation. *Ukiyo-e* and *bijin-ga* prints stand as examples. In Hokusai's *The Great Wave*, we can start to understand how widely distributed and ingrained in our culture a piece of art can be, and how it shapes our understanding of the culture from where it came. Similarly, *bijin-ga* prints have contributed to our own Western understanding of geishas, which has been thoroughly misunderstood and abused, even in recent years.⁷⁴

If we practice this kind of critical understanding in art education—through museums that hold exhibits that challenge the cultural narrative, or textbooks that seek to understand in full the power dynamics behind art pieces—it becomes natural to apply it

⁷⁴ I'm thinking of films like *Memoirs of a Geisha*. See Kimiko Akita, “Orientalism and the Binary of Fact and Fiction in *Memoirs of a Geisha*,” *Global Media Journal*, 5 no. 9 (2006): 1-11.

to current issues that affect our world today. We challenge the meanings that we are given by media and art and narratives and instead seek to understand the systems of power in place which give the event or person that meaning. As a society becoming increasingly globalized through technological innovation, this kind of thinking can lead to a community that is more understanding and empathetic, that does not blindly listen to harmful characterizations and representations, but instead chooses challenge those dangerous narratives.

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