

The Arcimboldo Effect in *Ukiyo-e*

By Nobuo Tsuji



Mikake wa kowaiga tonda ii hito da, Utagawa Kuniyoshi, woodprint



Water, Arcimboldo, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna



Minamoto-no-Yorimitsu Yakata Tsuchigumo Yokai-zu, Utagawa Kuniyoshi, woodprint

In the United States at the invitation of Harvard, I was pleasantly surprised the other day to come across a book entitled *The Arcimboldo Effect* in a Harvard Square bookstore. The main thesis of this book is that 20th-century avant-garde art is reviving a technique originated by a Prague court painter named Giuseppe Arcimboldo (ca. 1527–1593), who painted portraits structured of such unexpected components as animals, fish and plants. While I would have liked a fuller explanation of how Arcimboldo's unusual technique was picked up and spread throughout popular art, I was glad to see that it did provide an introduction, albeit brief, to his impact on Kuniyoshi and other non-European artists.

Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1797–1861) was a famous Edo (present-day Tokyo) *ukiyo-e* painter active during the chaotic years of the Tokugawa government's decline and the rapid surge of Western influences into Japan. A man of the town through and through, he had a finely honed sense of humor. His vigorous and lively works rank with those of his elder contemporary Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849) and portend the popular *manga* comic books of the present.

In Kuniyoshi's day, Japanese urban

culture had attained its peak and was slipping into a *fin de siècle* decadence. In Edo, stronghold of the Tokugawa Shogunate, political satire of unprecedented boldness was appearing in a variety of fields, much to the surprise and pleasure of city residents, and Kuniyoshi was an acknowledged master of the art.

His *Minamoto-no-Yorimitsu Yakata Tsuchigumo Yokai-zu* (depiction of apparitions in the house of Minamoto-no-Yorimitsu) is a blatant criticism of Shogunate senior official Mizuno Tadakuni's unpopular economic reforms. In Kuniyoshi's painting, the shogun is troubled night after night by visions of weird apparitions protesting Tadakuni's reforms. While the target of the satire is obvious, Kuniyoshi was careful to avoid any kind of overt representation, and even though he was questioned by the Tokugawa government's security agents, they finally decided they did not have sufficient grounds to hold him for sedition. The contorted apparitions appearing in this particular painting show up frequently in Kuniyoshi's work, symbols of the prevailing confusion and anxiety.

This figure is typical of Kuniyoshi's adaptation of the Arcimboldo effect and telling testimony to the fact that the tech-

nique had made its way all the way to East Asia by the mid-19th century. Kuniyoshi's portraits executed in the Arcimboldo technique were apparently sold as a series, and this portrait was titled *Mikake wa kowaiga tonda ii hito da* (he looks frightening but he is a fine fellow).

It consists of a person's face which, on closer examination, is revealed to be made up of a number of converging figures of naked men, their loincloths and topknots cleverly positioned to form eyebrows, eyes and lips. Kuniyoshi probably learned the technique from popular prints of Arcimboldo-style pictures he may have acquired from a Westerner living in Yokohama, although no evidence has turned up yet to confirm this supposition.

Whatever the inspiration, the image of closely entwined human figures was certainly not alien to a resident of crowded Edo—nor is it unfamiliar to the modern Tokyo businessman squeezing his way onto the morning commuter train. ■

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