

The Art of Eroticism

By Nobuo Tsuji



A piece from a *ukiyo-e* album entitled *Uta-makura* by Kitagawa Utamaro.



A piece from *Fukujuso* by Katsushika Hokusai.

Though AIDS has made them more circumspect, Japanese men still retain their reputation as “sex animals” in much of the rest of Asia, the target of notorious Japanese “prostitution tours.” The label of “sex animal” is nothing new, going as far back as the 15th century when Japanese sailors dallied with the prostitutes of China’s Ningbo, then an important stop for Japanese traders. A Chinese scholar has told me that there is a note in Ming dynasty records of a Japanese being struck on the shins for the loud noises he made at the climax of the sex act.

This kind of record is certainly nothing to boast about, but perhaps it can be a little better understood if one examines traditional Japanese sexual mores. Despite strict Confucian and Buddhist precepts against sexual indulgence, the Japanese people have never been very puritanical about sex, their general attitude being that sex is as natural a human function as eating and sleeping.

Shunga or pornographic pictures were brought to Japan from China in ancient times, but it was the Japanese who elevated the medium into a distinctive art culminating in the *ukiyo-e* woodblock *shunga* prints that were popular in the Edo period. So graphic are these

prints that they have been rigidly censored and hidden from the public gaze since the Meiji period (1868–1911), their aesthetic value only very recently being recognized.

Shunga were an important part of the *ukiyo-e* repertoire. *Ukiyo-e shunga* have an exquisite nuance and aesthetic appeal that is a far cry from the Western perception of “dirty pictures.” The originator of *ukiyo-e* is generally believed to have been Hishikawa Moronobu (died in 1694) who published more than 120 *ukiyo-e* picture books during his lifetime, around 30% of which were pornographic. Moronobu’s example was followed by other *ukiyo-e* greats such as Suzuki Harunobu (1725–1770), Torii Kiyonaga (1752–1815), Kitagawa Utamaro (1753–1806) and Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849), whose endeavors to add new expression to *shunga* were much helped by the financial support they received from rich Edo merchants.

I have chosen to end my series of articles on Japanese art with two typical *shunga* prints. One is from *Uta-makura* (Poems of the Pillow), an album of erotic prints by Utamaro. The well-rounded young woman depicted here has blackened teeth, a sign that she is married. Her husband hugs her breasts from be-

hind. The woman wears an expression of wholesome bliss as her hands attempt to cover their naked bodies with a kimono. The white flesh of the couple and the colors of the kimono combine in an undulating symphony of decorative harmony.

The second illustration is taken from a picture album entitled *Fukujuso* (The Adonis Plant) by Hokusai. The wave-like lines of the intertwined lovers perfectly express their sexual ecstasy. The accompanying text explains that the woman is an unfaithful wife having a love affair with another man.

The exaggerated dimensions of the sexual organs is a distinguishing feature of Japanese *shunga* that is not found in their Chinese predecessors. Historical records indicate that this feature was equally common in the pornography of the Heian period (794–1185). This kind of exaggeration is not exclusive to *shunga* but can be found in much of traditional Japanese art, for a part of Japanese aesthetic philosophy is that artistic expression requires an element of fiction or the fabulous to stimulate the imagination and elevate it from the commonplace. ■

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