

# Thoughts on *Bijin-e* Beauties in Ukiyo-e Art

By Inada Toshiyuki

The way in which women, their faces and fashions were portrayed within the evolution and development of ukiyo-e of beautiful women, or *bijin-e*, deserves some consideration.

These prints clearly gave the ordinary man and woman a great deal of pleasure and added color to their lives. They were fundamental to the culture of Edo (Tokyo) and can provide us with an important way of knowing just how the awareness of life by the ordinary person changed with the development of the way women were portrayed.



Kansei no san bijin by Kitagawa Utamaro

Prints of beautiful women first became known as *bijin-ga* in the Meiji period, although during the preceding Edo period artists had depicted women in what were called *bijin-e* and *onna-e*.

The faces of the women were idealizations of particular women. They were done by individual artists following established forms of stylization and using definitive methods to create fanciful renderings, and each artist must surely have been proud of these highly individual forms of expression.

Representations demonstrating the full extent of these artists' idiosyncrasies, however, were not simply confined to the face, and the way that beauty was expressed in other parts of the body was also very important, as was the balance between the head and the rest of the body.

Each artist had such a particular way of expressing what was beautiful that they did not encroach on one another's style. It therefore follows that archetypes of female beauty existed in the Edo period but it must be recognized that there may not have been women who had the kind of figure and build that ordinary people admired.

But if we consider the way that people throughout the Edo period idolized beautiful women, then there is no mistaking the fact that print artists tried their best to find a way of linking expressions of beauty with women who the public considered to be "beautiful." Artists



Comparative illustration of faces by Utagawa Toyokuni and Keisai Eisen

were, in other words, attempting to create highly individualized idealizations, rather in the way that famous women from the stage, movies or the world of music are idolized in publicity photographs.

How did artists tackle the problem of composing faces in prints? A sidewise view of the face, in proportions of seven to three, was not only an excellent way of bringing out the particular qualities of expression of the nose but was also a way of achieving an overall balance of the features of the face.

It is, of course, easy to change an entire face by the way that the eyes, nose, mouth and ears are depicted. A comparison of various facial compositions however, reveals that the nose was a keystone in the compositions of the face of the ukiyo-e artist. Artists' depictions of the nose and mouth as instruments of expression were evident, since every artist was consistent in the

way he drew a face looking either to the left or right. A distinctive hairstyle, clothing, and background were what made these works look different from each other.

It is also interesting to note that there

is practically no difference between male and female facial expressions. Of all the parts of the body, it is the face which gives the most sensitive indication of beauty or ugliness. The eyes and mouth are handled in a rich variety of

ways, while the ears and nose are more or less unchanging and static. The eyes, nose and mouth usually deserve a great deal of attention, too. A nose is a three-dimensional feature; thus it would be hard to give the face an expression and show its unique form if it faced to the front.

There are an amazing number of variations in the way that faces are depicted depending on the fashion and trends of the age, and the country concerned. Faces of beautiful women at the end of the Heian period had slit eyes (*hikime*) and an "L" shaped nose (*kagihana*), with no indication of the wings of the nose (*kobana*). If the wings of the nose are over-stated, then there is a tendency for the feeling of elegance and gracefulness to be lost.

The depiction of the nose presents no particular problem when western painting methods are used, as a three dimensional effect can be achieved by creating a realistic shadow. In Japan, not only in old paintings but also within the development of ukiyo-e prints during the Edo period, the means of



A comparison of form and garments from *Yuagari no zu* by Utagawa Kunisada

expression lay in the beauty of line drawings. Attempts to express the face in the most aesthetically pleasing way led to the development of a pose avoiding a head-on view both in painting and in prints, and this in turn served to emphasize any movement of the female form. A classic example of this is the so-called *Mikaeri Bijin*. Standing in a rather unlikely pose looking back over her shoulder with her body twisted from the hips, the upper part of her body is seen practically head on while the lower half is almost seen from the side.

The *bijin-e* prints are a fascinating subject and represent part of the constant quest for female beauty that went on from the time ukiyo-e first appeared right through to the end of the Edo period. This quest is, in fact, just one of the manifestations of the townpeople's culture (*chomin bunka*), created with such determination by ordinary citizens within the strict social framework of the class system of feudal Japan.

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