

Ukiyo-e Women and Periods of Change

By Inada Toshiyuki

Ukiyo-e is a universally acclaimed art that blossomed during the Edo period. These wood-block prints became an indispensable part of the lives of ordinary men and women alive then and, even if we consider the great variety of work produced in a global context, its importance within the history of art cannot be underestimated. The significance of these prints, however, is not simply artistic. The fact that they depicted the lives of ordinary people in such a demonstrative way, makes these highly graphic representations of life of the populous a most valuable and unsurpassed means of understanding the manners and customs of those times.

As such, these drawn and printed representations of life are important. But, because of the sheer numbers and variety of people portrayed, they were an important source of information and heightened the awareness of the people. As a consequence of this, they were a spur to society and were directly responsible for developing the ever changing character of life at the time. To say, therefore, that these "pictures of the floating world" were

at the very root of Edo culture is in no way an exaggeration.

Kabuki and the pleasure quarter of Edo, for example, flourished as a result of being featured in prints and the people's interest turned toward the lighter side of life, helping them to forget their troubles and to adopt a much more fun-loving attitude. Ukiyo-e was therefore instrumental in changing the way that ordinary people lived.

A number of different kinds of women are depicted in ukiyo-e. There are married women, young girls, women who served at the tea-houses, various kinds of women from the pleasure quarter, women from warrior families and even the nobility are portrayed without prejudice. What was more important than the class or social standing of these women was whether or not there was some aspect of their life that might be seized upon by the ukiyo-e artist to make an individual rendering, some moment of beauty that would enable him to capture a particular movement or pose in what would be a fine piece of work.

Of all the Ukiyo-e prints that were produced, it is perhaps those of beautiful women that are the most fascinating. In fact, it would be possible to make a complete study of



Bijin-ga by Kaigetsudo Ando



Imayo Bijo Kurabe by Keisai Eisen

such beauties through the prints but we will confine ourselves to just one aspect of the subject.

In some of the early ukiyo-e prints, which were printed in black outline and then hand colored, the women seem a little mischievous and slightly on the corpulent side: their faces bear the characteristics of Kyoto women with all their elegance and serenity. The coquettish expression which becomes all the more appealing if the mouth is open in a smile is, in particular, something that can be



Kagiya Osen by Suzuki Harunobu

easily related to, and represents one of the features of the beauties in times when the taste was for rounder women.

One of the representative beauties of the Meiwa period (1764-71) was Kagiya Osen, who served at a stall near the Kasamori shrine in Yanaka, Edo. Others were Yanagiya Ofuji and Tsutaya Oyoshi—all were rivals and idols of the age.



Tomimoto no Toyohina by Kitagawa Utamaro

Osen was certainly not corpulent. She seems to have been very neat in appearance, only lightly made up, and very well known through the work of Suzuki Harunobu. She must have been especially good looking as Osen dolls were produced at the time and she also figured in a play. She appeared on the popularly used hand-towel or *tenugui*, on backgammon sets and was well known enough to appear in such things as popular illustrated books and even to be portrayed on tile block prints distributed on the streets of Edo. Until quite recently, children used to sing of her in a nursery rhyme that could be heard at every street corner during the Meiwa period, in those districts of Edo frequented by ordinary townspeople.

Women from quite different walks of life were depicted right through the period from 1655-1800. Some were *geisha*, some were simply young women who were well known about town. Others were highly influential beauties who were companions to feudal lords and those of the upper echelons of society. They were skillfully drawn and ideally proportioned, finely dressed in the latest patterns, with interesting hair styles, inventive made up, and with the line of the neck exaggerated to conform with the maxims of contemporary taste and fashion.

In the print *Kansei no San Bijin* — Three Beauties of the Kansei Period, the ukiyo-e artist Kitagawa Utamaro portrayed Tomimoto no Toyohina, Takashima Ohisa, and Nanbaya Okita, three beautiful women who it is known were rivals. At the time, a woman was considered to be beyond her best when she was over 20 and girls of 17 or 18 were considered to be in their prime.

It seems that Okita was 16 when this print appeared and Ohisa was 17. Okita served at a tea-house and is said to have been a charming girl who was both comely and particularly attractive.

Beauties such as Okita and others like those in *Kansei no san bijin* figured strongly in the work of



Shichifukujin Kiryo Kurabe by Kitagawa Utamaro

Utamaro. He established his own style of portraying women, making slight differences in hairstyle, the outline of the face, the angle of the line of the nose, and the eyes and eyebrows. It is particularly interesting to note, however, that all the faces of the women he portrayed are almost exactly symmetrical. The *Shichifukujin Kiryo Kurabe* is an example of Utamaro's taste and typical of his style.

The culture of the townspeople of Edo was in full ascendancy during the Meiwa (1764-71), Anei (1772-80) and Tenmei (1781-88) periods, and by the Kansei period changes were noticeable in the manners, customs and the general way of life of the people. During the subsequent Bunka (1804-17) and Bunsei (1811-29) periods there was a shift in moral standards and tastes changed. People began to show a liking for the beauty and figure of the more mature woman and the effect which ukiyo-e had on society reached new heights. People's sense of values, in other words, were influenced by ukiyo-e and this in turn contributed largely to cultural change.

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