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The Riddles of

UKIYO-E

Women and Men in Japanese Prints 1765-1865

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The Riddles of

UKIYO-E

Women and Men in Japanese Prints 1765–1865



鈴木春信画

Suzuki Harunobu 鈴木春信 (1725?–70)

Whispering

Date: 1767

Signature: *Suzuki Harunobu ga*Size: *chūban*

Collection Scholten, The Netherlands

These two lovers and their secret onlooker are designed in the typical elegant and slender manner for which Harunobu is known. At first glance, the inexperienced viewer might think the lovers are a lesbian couple, with the woman on the left whispering sweet nothings into her lover's ear. However, the person on the right is a man – a *wakashu* (male youth), to be more precise. *Wakashu* are androgynous teenage boys, and throughout the Edo period they were depicted in romantic or sexual relations with both men and women. Though it has proven tricky for many viewers to correctly distinguish a woman from a *wakashu*,⁹ the shaven pate, just behind the forelocks (*maegami*), and the bun that is bent to the front (*chonmage*) are tell-tale signs (more on *wakashu* in cat. 10).

Not only the two figures, but also their surroundings are carefully chosen by Harunobu to convey meaning. The branches in the foreground are lespedeza, or Japanese bush clover (*hagi*), indicating that this scene takes place during early autumn. Furthermore, the veranda on which the two are seated resembles a teahouse veranda, which suggests that these lovers are probably not just any loving couple.

The print has been identified as a possible *mitate*, a playful parody that connects the print to a famous scene from classical or popular culture. It is likely based on the opening scene of the play *Shinjū ten no Amajima* (*The Love Suicide at Amajima*), a tragic story based on a double suicide in Kyoto, written by the famous playwright Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653–1724). First staged in

the twelfth month of 1720, it was originally written for the *bunraku* puppet theatre and later revised to fit the kabuki stage. The story tells of the fateful lovers Koharu, who worked in the Kinokuniya brothel, and the paper seller Kamiya Jihei, who is married to Osan and has two children. The opening scene takes place at a teahouse, where Koharu and Osan exchange letters in which Osan urges the woman to stop seeing her husband. Noticing that Koharu is forlorn, Osugi, a fellow brothel worker – possibly represented by the onlooking woman in the print – tries to cheer her up by suggesting that she takes the wealthy Tahei as her new lover. When Koharu rejects this idea in an insulting manner, Tahei overhears and, enraged, threatens Koharu. Through a string of events that involve Koharu, Tahei, Jihei and Jihei's brother Magoemon, the two lovers are ultimately forced to break up and they reluctantly return each other's old love letters. The piece of paper in the fold of the man's kimono might be a nod to these letters. The play, unsurprisingly, ends in drama and death, as the title suggests.

The latticework visible through the thin paper of the *shōji* (sliding doors) is blind-printed (*karazuri*). This is achieved by applying pressure on a woodblock without pigment, so that the decorative motif carved into the block appears in relief in the paper. Harunobu was the first to use this technique extensively; some scholars suggest he was the very first to use this technique.¹⁰ (JS)

9 Mostow et al., 2016, 76.

10 Brea & Kondo, 1980, 137 and Waterhouse, 2013, 412.

Suzuki Harunobu 鈴木春信 (1725?–70)Love at the Brothel Gate (*Okumon koi* 屋門恋)

Date: c. 1767

Signature: *Harunobu ga*Size: *chūban*

Collection Scholten, The Netherlands

A sex worker waiting for her next client behind the lattice partition of a brothel is visited by her secret lover, a street performer with a miniature theatre. The young girl on the right is trying to lure clients to the brothel.

A brothel's low-ranking prostitutes (*shinzō*) were usually put on display behind wooden lattice partitions. In this way, she advertised both herself and her brothel. Visitors to the Yoshiwara district could walk by and directly select a woman (an appointment was necessary for those of higher rank, who were not on display). *Kamuro*, young girls who were sold to brothels but were too young to serve as prostitutes (see also cat. 12), often assisted in this form of advertisement by luring potential customers from the street towards the women on display.

The woman's obi is decorated with cranes, and the emblem of a stylised crane adorns the back of the *kamuro*, which suggests they worked for the Tsuruya, one of the larger brothels in the Yoshiwara.

The poem inscribed in the stylised cloud above reads:

*omohedomo
ihade tsuki hi ha
sugi no kado
sasuga ni ikaga
shinobihatsu beki*

Although I yearn
I do not speak
as days and months
pass by behind my cedar gate.
How can I endure
keeping this secret within?

(Translation by Laurel Rasplica Rodd)¹⁸

This poem by courtier Fujiwara no Tadasada (1087–1133) was included in the early 13th-century imperial anthology, *Shin kokin wakashū* (*New Collection of Poems Ancient and Modern*). It might express the woman's desire to be with her lover while she has to wait behind her 'cedar gate' – in other words, the wooden lattices. She waits for him for as long as necessary while keeping her feelings a secret.

This poem uses *kakekotoba*, a figure of speech in which a word has a double meaning based on the pronunciation of the characters. *Sugi* can mean both 'passing' and 'cedar', depending on the character with which it is written, but here it signifies both simultaneously. Using such words with double meanings was a common trope in *waka* poetry. The poem emphasises the tragedy of not being able to meet one's lover, as well as the poor circumstances in the Yoshiwara brothels. While this *shinzō* watches time and people pass her by, she yearns for her lover but must repress her feelings: she is confined by the lattice partitions of the brothel, unable to leave.

(FvA)

高門意
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見七人代粧



哥之海子
三



Kitagawa Utamaro 喜多川歌麿 (1753–1806)

Okita

From the series *Seven Women Applying Makeup Using a Full-length Mirror* (*Sugatami shichinin keshō* 姿見七人化粧)

Date: c. 1792–93

Signature: *Utamaro ga*

Publisher: Tsutaya Jūzaburō (Kōshodō)

Censorship seal: *kiwame*

Collector's seal: *Wakai Oyaji* (Wakai Kenzaburō)

Size: *ōban*

Collection Scholten, The Netherlands



FIG. 7

Okita of the Naniwaya, in the *ryōmen-zuri* format, Kitagawa Utamaro (after), c. 1790s (private collection).

This young woman is most likely Okita from the Naniwaya teahouse. She can be distinguished from other *bijin* by Utamaro because of her particular facial features (mainly the subtle curvature of her nose) and the crests just visible on her robe (the stylised paulownia flower on both shoulders). Her mirror is known as *sugatami* (literally 'full shape view'), as these were large enough to admire oneself in full. This print was intended as part of a series of seven, but only this one is known.

Okita was a waitress at the Naniwaya teahouse in Asakusa, and a well-known one at that. According to some accounts, it was always crowded in front of the shop because people travelled from across Edo just to see her beauty.²¹ The city streets of Edo harboured many teahouses (*mizuchaya*) offering refreshments to passers-by. In most prints by Utamaro and others, Okita is portrayed carrying tea with a tray, but here she is shown in a more intimate setting. He made at least 15 portraits of the waitress.

The composition with the mirror enables the viewer to see Okita from both front and back – the nape was considered a sensual part of the body – and appreciate her famed beauty in full. On the left is a reproduction of another design by Utamaro that depicts Okita (fig. 7). This sheet is printed on both sides, with Okita from the front on one side and from the back on the other. This technique is called *ryōmen-zuri* ('both sides printing'). When you hold the print up to the light, the outlines match almost exactly.

(IH)

Kitagawa Utamaro 喜多川歌麿 (1753–1806)

The Bumbling Type (*Fudekashi-mono* 不作者)

From the series *The Parent's Moralising Spectacles*
(*Kyōkun oya no megane* 教訓親の目鏡)

Date: c. 1802–04

Signature: *Utamaro hitsu*

Publisher: Tsuruya Kiemon (Senkakudō); seal: stylised crane

Size: *ōban*

Collection Scholten, The Netherlands

The title of this moralistic series suggests the idea of looking at a woman's behaviour from a parent's point of view. A woman from the Yoshiwara is attempting to remove traces of a past love affair by using moxibustion (Eastern medicine that involves burning dried mugwort on the skin) to erase the name of a former lover tattooed on her body. Her professional hairstyle decorated with hairpins and her clothes – three layers of patterned kimono plus a silk under-robe, and a plain obi tied at the front – point to a mid-ranking *oiran*.

The series title is inscribed in the top left inside a pair of spectacles, which were usually associated with thorough investigation. The title itself has a variety of meanings: *kyōkun* is a direct reference to the many writings on the proper education of women according to Neo-Confucian morals, comparing the texts on the prints with such scholarly treatises. *Oya* generally corresponds to 'parents'. Finally, *megane* translates as 'spectacles', but it is written in an unconventional way, using the character 目 instead of 眼 for the syllable *me*, suggesting a different kind of spectacle – a display. The series of ten designs had a moral purpose, to point out examples of ineffective parental teaching.

The text in the top right gives the reader an idea of the woman's personality and is moralising in tone. The text does not fit the design very well – it is interrupted by the woman's hairpins, for example. It has been suggested that the didactic text was added to gain approval from the government's censorship

officials, but the prints bear no censorship seals, meaning they were published without being approved by the authorities in the first place.²⁷

The lines, seemingly rather hastily written, explain that despite lacking the necessary qualities, the woman ended up imitating famous *yūjo* ('women of pleasure') of the past:

This is not a problem with high-ranked *keisei*, but cheap prostitutes imagine the wilful natures of [notorious *yūjo* of old such as] Komurasaki and Takao are examples of true romance, and they do not realise that there are other famous women more worthy of emulation as courtesans [...]²⁸

During the Edo period, wealthy patrons would sometimes pay enough money to buy the contract of a sex worker from her brothel's owner. She would leave the pleasure quarters as his personal mistress and become a *kakoimono* ('kept woman'). The woman here has tragically been left by the patron she thought would pay for a sponsorship (and possibly her ransom). As an act of love and fealty, she tattooed his name on her arm. Abandoning proper manners for fleeting desire and failing to see the decadent man's lack of gentlemanly behaviour, she has been made a fool of and is an example to avoid.

(NP)

27 For a detailed discussion of the full set, see Davis, 2007, 174–194.

28 Asano & Clark, 1995, 228.



29

Utagawa Toyokuni 歌川豊国 (1769–1825)

Twelve Months of Modern Beauties, Midsummer Illustration
(*Imaya jūnikagetsu chūka no zu* 今様十二ヶ月仲夏之図)

Date: 1822

Signature: *Toyokuni ga*; seal: *toshidama*

Publisher: Ibaya Senzaburō (Dansendō); seal: *San*

Censorship seal: *kiwame*

Size: *aiban* diptych

Collection Scholten, The Netherlands

This print by Toyokuni was designed specifically for an *uchiwa* (a rigid fan, as opposed to a folding fan). Fan prints were produced in great numbers during the 18th and 19th centuries, but because they were made to be used, not many have survived. Most of those that have survived are uncut designs, often from fan sellers' sample catalogues. This particular design is part of a series depicting beautiful women engaged in various activities such as reading and drinking, connected to a month of the year. Each fan has a front and back design that together form one scene.

The front shows a sex worker looking down a flight of stairs as she holds on to the railing. The censor's stamp, date seal (interestingly, upside down) and the publisher's seal, all mandatory by law, are placed in between the beams of the



red railing. The series and print title are inscribed to the right of the woman. The word *chūka* in the title can be translated as 'midsummer', but refers specifically to the fifth month of the lunar calendar (which in 1822 would have started around late June according to the Gregorian calendar). The mood is that of a humid summer night, just after the lights in the room have been extinguished. The mosquito net on the rear of the fan is a common summer motif.

To avoid succumbing to the summer heat, the woman is dressed in a short-sleeved *yukata* (cotton robe) with a floral pattern and bright red lining. Close to her face and covering her mouth she holds a piece of paper marked with the rouge of her lips. The paper is an *onkotogami* (literally 'paper for the

honourable act'), which was used to clean oneself after the 'honourable act'. Some recently used paper can be seen on the tray behind the mosquito net. She might be eyeing a customer, perhaps her recent visitor, as she gazes down the staircase from the brothel's upper floor.

The effect of darkness is achieved through an artistic technique applied to the background called *grisaille* (literally 'greyness'), first employed in prints by Kubo Shunman (1757–1820). One way to achieve this is to use a localised grey gradient for the shadow while the rest of the design is rendered in normal colours.²⁹

(AM)

Utagawa Kuniyoshi 歌川国芳 (1797–1861)Miyamoto Musashi (*Miyamoto Musashi* 宮本無三四)

From the series *Eight Hundred Heroes of Our Country's Water Margin*
 (*Honchō Suikoden gōyū happyakunin no hitori* 本朝水滸伝剛勇八百人一個)
 Date: c. 1834–35
 Signature: *Ichiyūsai Kuniyoshi ga*
 Publisher: Kagaya Kichiemon (Seiseidō); seal: *Kichi, Ryōgoku, Kagaya*
 Censorship seal: *kiwame*
 Size: *ōban*
 Collection Paul Beliën, The Netherlands

Warrior print specialist Kuniyoshi lets the viewer bear witness to the slaying of a giant lizard-like creature, known as a *yamazame* (literally 'mountain shark'), by Miyamoto Musashi (1584–1645). No swordsman is more famous than Musashi, who remained undefeated in combat until his peaceful death at the ripe age of 60. Musashi passed down his knowledge and philosophy on martial arts in his widely read text *Go rin no sho* (*Writings of the Five Elements*, also known as *The Book of Five Rings*). Musashi is especially known for developing the *niten ichi-ryū* ('two heavens as one') sword-fighting style, notable for its use of two swords simultaneously – a katana in one hand and a smaller *wakizashi* in the other. Here, he is using a spear instead of his swords, and two richly decorated hilts are visible on his right side. As well as being a famed warrior, Musashi was an excellent painter and calligrapher. He remains a prominent figure in popular culture to this day.

Musashi is shown fighting a giant reptile that dwelled in the mountains bordering Echizen, Mino and Hida provinces (Fukui and Gifu prefectures today). The story has it that the local townspeople were hopelessly outmatched by the monster, unable

to even lay a scratch on its thick, scaly armour. Musashi was able to defeat the monster with a well-placed gunshot and a single thrust of his spear. The print depicts Musashi's final blow.

Although the modern viewer knows that creatures such as the *yamazame* do not exist, in Kuniyoshi's time belief in all sorts of ghosts and monsters was still widespread. The possibility of encountering an otherworldly being was a genuine fear for many. The *yamazame* was thought to be born out of decaying leaves on the mountainside, which may be the reason for the colouration of the creature's scales, resembling autumn foliage.

Kuniyoshi produced around 30 prints for his *Eight Hundred Heroes of Our Country's Suikoden*, a version of the *Water Margin* that substituted the Chinese outlaws with famous Japanese warriors (see cat. 64 for more information on the *Water Margin*). The Chinese novel was adapted for a Japanese audience in 1773, when the literatus Takebe Ayatari (1719–74) wrote *Honchō Suikoden* (*Our Country's Water Margin*) with which Kuniyoshi's print series shares its name.

(ZZ)

本朝水滸傳勇人象酒
宮本無三四

越前美濃の
飛彈の
境の
越の
山中
山嶺
鮫
魚
殺



勇人
芳
卷



當田盛平人形



帝
三

一勇齋
圖廿万画

イセ芳

彫庄治

Utagawa Kuniyoshi 歌川国芳 (1797–1861)

Tanmeijirō Gen Shōgo

From the series *Modern Life-Size Dolls* (*Tōsei iki-ningyō* 當盛生人形)
 Date: 2/1856
 Signature: *Ichiyūsai Kuniyoshi ga*; seal: stylised paulownia flower
 Publisher: Iseyoshi
 Censorship seal: *aratame*, Dragon 2
 Block-cutter's seal: *Hori Shōji* (Tsuge Shōjirō)
 Size: *ōban*
 Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam – RP-P-2019-230

Ningyō in the title refers to *iki-ningyō* ('lifelike dolls'), a type of realistic, life-size, clothed doll. They were related to *misemono* (literally 'showing things') – streetside spectacles and shows, sometimes staged in temporary booths – that were a popular form of entertainment in the Edo period. *Misemono* often comprised exhibitions of unusual items, individuals or skills, but did not follow a particular genre of showmanship. For example, there was a popular *misemono* spot at Ryōgoku bridge. In 1734, it featured an exhibition of beached whale carcasses. In 1774, an individual who could fart on command, known as the 'mist-descending flower-blossoming man' (*kirifuri-hanasaki-otoko*), inspired awe with his flatulent melodies at the same spot.⁵⁶ Another type of *misemono* was the display of *ningyō* ('dolls' or 'figures') of various sizes, which were popular with the stallholders because they were reliable sources of revenue. The simple static dolls gradually developed into *iki-ningyō*, which were driven by springs to achieve a limited range of repetitive motions. In 1856 – the same year this print was issued – Matsumoto Kisaburō (1825–91), a *misemono* practitioner from Kumamoto created

a successful show with articulated dolls that depicted heroes from the *Water Margin* and other figures from Japanese legends.⁵⁷

In this print of the *Water Margin* story, Kuniyoshi borrows a similar composition and design from one of his first *Water Margin* series, published around 1829. One of the novel's characters, Ruan Xiaowu (JP: Gen Shōgo, discussed in greater detail in cat. 64), is fighting in the water with He Tao, an official sent by the government to arrest Xiaowu after he and other bandits had stolen goods from the powerful bureaucrat Cai Jing. Xiaowu was known to be a nimble swimmer. Kuniyoshi masterfully captures Xiaowu's agility in the water, and the ease with which he overcomes his enemy.

The interaction between Kuniyoshi's prints and the phenomenon of 'living dolls' in *misemono* also reveals how *ukiyo-e* printmaking was an artform rooted in urban culture that closely followed the latest trends. The *Water Margin's* appearance in the *misemono* attest to the popularity of this Chinese novel in the late Edo period.

(LZ)

56 Markus, 1985, 509, 530.

57 Markus, 1985, 521–522.