

2013

Beneath the Printed Pattern: Display and Disguise in Ukiyo-e Bijinga

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Citation

Moblard Meier, Anna, "Beneath the Printed Pattern: Display and Disguise in Ukiyo-e Bijinga" (2013). *Books, pamphlets, catalogues, and scrapbooks*. Book 25.
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Beneath the Printed Pattern: Display and Disguise in Ukiyo-e Bijinga

During the summer of 2013, I was awarded the McPherson Curatorial Fellowship by the Graduate Group in Archaeology, Classics, and History of Art to curate a fall exhibition at Bryn Mawr. This fellowship allowed me to continue research in the Special Collections department begun during the previous academic year under the guidance of the college curator, Brian Wallace. My initial interest was guided by the focus of my research, the influence of Japanese art on western modernism. I began by studying the college's Japanese prints from the Edo period (1615-1868), a key source for the late nineteenth century conception of Japan in the west. As in many collections of *ukiyo-e*, *bijinga*, "pictures of beautiful people," make up the majority of Bryn Mawr's holdings of Japanese prints. The prevalence of these images both in the college collection and in the visual language of the Edo Period critically shaped the narrative of the exhibition "Beneath the Printed Pattern." Rather than pairing western works with Japanese sources, this exhibit explored the complexities of the *bijinga* genre.

–Anna Moblard Meier

Curated by graduate student in History of Art Anna Moblard Meier and organized by Bryn Mawr College Special Collections, this exhibition was made possible by a Mary Patterson McPherson Curatorial Fellowship awarded by the Graduate Group in Archaeology, Classics, and History of Art. The Friends of the Library provide generous support for exhibitions and related programs. Special thanks are given to Bryn Mawr Alumna Tienfong Ho and University of Pennsylvania Professor Julie Nelson Davis.

Intro Panel

Beneath the Printed Pattern: Display and Disguise in Ukiyo-e Bijinga

Bijinga, “pictures of beautiful people,” is one of the most recognizable genres of *ukiyo-e*, “pictures of the floating world.” A *bijinga* depicts a beautiful person, a *bijin*, who is most often a beautiful woman. Represented in many guises, *bijinga* are idealized images of the courtesans and kabuki actors of Japan’s pleasure districts, euphemistically referred to as the *ukiyo*, “the floating world.”

On the surface, *bijinga* are a vibrant display of cascading kimonos. Akin to contemporary fashion photography, every detail of the figure’s posture is carefully arranged to emphasize the printed patterns of flora and fauna that adorn the *bijin*’s layered kimonos. Like advertisements of today, these “beauties” set the latest fashion trends and modeled the couture of the rising merchant townspeople (*chōnin*) in the urban capital. As the seat of the Tokugawa shogun, Edo (present-day Tokyo) had one of the largest city populations in the world, and despite strict regulations and sumptuary laws, fashion flourished in this metropolitan center. The production of luxurious kimonos peaked during the Edo Period (1615-1868), and their illustration in *ukiyo-e* was an essential thread of the capital’s visual fabric.

Beneath this vibrant display is the complexity of *ukiyo-e*. In *bijinga*, *ukiyo-e* artists united commercial advertisement with classical painting, popular culture with the aesthetic traditions of the imperial court, and parody with earnest celebration of the natural world. Hence defining *bijinga* is in many ways the task of deciphering the symbolically laden visual vocabulary of Edo-Period Japan. Although “the floating world” and its representations were marketed to wealthy *Edokko* (townspeople) as an escape from the strict Neo-Confucian morality of the day, nearly every detail of *bijinga*—from the patterns on the costumes to the settings—is a

legible expression of societal boundaries and class distinctions. A simple pattern could identify the wearer's status and family name or illustrate the wearer's refined sensitivity to the changing seasons. Furthermore, particular color combinations and designs were only appropriate in certain seasons or were restricted by class and lineage.

For example, pigments like beni-red could only be worn by the uppermost levels of society. Yet, as can be seen in most *bijinga*, deep shades of red that resemble the petals of the beni flower were favored in Edo-Period fashion. Inventive textile manufacturers imitated forbidden pigments in order to indulge the tastes of their clients. Wealthy but low-ranking women had their inner kimonos dyed in restricted hues and slyly displayed this luxury by allowing the hem of the inner garments to peek out from under their more subdued outer kimonos. In Edo Period textiles and *ukiyo-e*, visual signs of rank were complicated by references to the idealized refinements of the Heian court (794-1185). By including calligraphic inscriptions of classical poetry and emblematic pairings from traditional painting, kimono designers and *ukiyo-e* artists connected the popular culture of Edo to the authority, prestige, and glamourized history of Heian-kyō (the imperial capital, present day Kyoto). This layering of cultural symbols of status reinforced but also disrupted the social divisions of the feudal caste system.

In this exhibition, *bijinga* and related imagery were selected in order to illuminate these contradictions. The images were organized into five thematic sections: *Sites of Display*, *Advertised Beauty*, *Classical References and the Connoisseur*, *Details from Nature*, and *Unlikely Stages and the Illusion of Proximity*.

Sites of Display

This thematic section brought together a group of landscapes depicting Edo's famous places. From the theater stage to the gates of the brothel district (*yoshiwara*), these locations were sites of voyeurism and self-display. During seasonal celebrations like the spring cherry blossom festival, the populace of Edo (*Edokko*) would gather at these famous locations to see and be seen in the latest fashions. In the caste system of feudal Japan, society was divided into four classes: warriors, farmers, artisans, and merchants. Individuals were required to clearly identify their rank in their accessories and costume. The Tokugawa shogun frequently issued sumptuary laws to enforce these divisions. As a consequence of these reforms, textile designs of the Edo Period were particularly inventive and rich in thematic and emblematic motifs.

The *kosode*, the precursor of the modern-day kimono, was the standard garment for all classes during the Edo Period; the differentiation lay in the color, decoration, and quality of the garment. With subtle variations, clothing reflected the sex, age, marital status, class, rank, and occupation of the wearer. In response to restrictive laws, new techniques were developed like stencils and starch-resistant dyeing to give the appearance of forbidden luxuries while officially complying with shogunal law. Family crests (*mon*), emblematic patterns first developed by the aristocracy in the Heian Period (794–1185), were adopted by military rulers in the Kamakura Period (1185–1391) and in turn by merchants and artisans in the Edo Period (1615-1868). Just as the Tokugawa strategically appropriated motifs from the imperial past, the wealthy lower ranks of *Edokko* associated themselves with the ruling class and the refinements of court culture through these symbols. Derived from natural forms, family crests carried auspicious connotations from the Buddhist and Shinto traditions as well as poetic references to nature from classical literature and art.

Dress regulations in the Edo Period were difficult to enforce. The reissuance of sumptuary laws strengthened symbolic class distinctions as well as encouraged their imitation and appropriation. In the exhibited group of cityscapes and landscapes, the fashionable people of Edo parade through the streets shopping at famous stores (*Daimaru Dry-goods Store*) and visiting festivals and shrines. In each image, no two garments are alike, clearly illustrating the importance of fashion and its public display amongst the *Edokko* of early modern Japan.

Advertised Beauty

Produced in a variety of formats and qualities, Edo-Period *bijinga* advertised the latest hairstyles and textile designs, the plays and celebrated actors of the kabuki theater, specific teashops and performance arenas in Edo, and the “entertainment women” (*yūjo*) and festivals of the *yoshiwara*, Edo’s licensed brothel district. In conjunction with published guidebooks to the *yoshiwara* and stylebooks on “floating world” manners, the prints in this thematic section promoted the celebrity of the *bijin* and offered the broader public of Edo visual access to the most exclusive courtesans of the “floating world.” These images led the changing fashions of the metropolitan capital, and, as several *ukiyo-e* scholars have suggested, were advertisements commissioned by brothel houses, theaters, and textile manufacturers.

Mirroring the caste system outside its walls, the indentured servants of the segregated pleasure districts were also classified in a hierarchical structure. The highest-ranking courtesans (*keise*) were given names like Hanaōgi, Komurasaki, Takao, and Segawa that referred to the elite brothels of the district and were passed down through successive generations. In *ukiyo-e* prints these women were usually identified by name, yet in Torii Kiyonaga’s portrait of Hanaōgi, the courtesan’s status and name would have been legible through the image alone. Her numerous attendants (*shinzō*), in matching and elaborate dress, would have indicated

Hanaōgi's rank as a *keise*. The patterns of sakura cherry blossoms and fans in the image would have revealed her name (Hanaōgi's crest was sakura petals) and house (the Ōgiya crest was three fans). Although only the wealthiest residents of Edo could afford to patronize courtesans of Hanaōgi's standing, these *bijinga* provided the *ukiyo-e* collector with a fantasy. By knowing the pictorial language of *bijinga*, the populace of Edo could identify illustrious courtesans as they appeared at festivals or as they made their way to engagements in the city. Through *bijinga*, the viewer could participate from afar in the glamorous mirage of the "floating world."

Classical Reference and the Connoisseur

This section of the exhibition grouped together works with references to classical literature, like *The Tales of Ise* (ca. 880-905) and *The Tales of Genji* (ca. 1000), and the activities, refinements and historical figures of the Heian court (794-1185). In these prints, *bijin* are depicted in the guise of Ariwara no Narihira (825-880), the idealized central character of *The Tales of Ise*, or shown employed in reading the works of the other immortal poets.

Classical references in *ukiyo-e* took many shapes from the inclusion of poetry to playful visual puns and homophonous titles. By drawing connections to the idealized Kyoto court of the Heian Period, artists equated the etiquette of the "floating world" with the traditions and aesthetics of imperial culture. Even in cases of parody, as for example the representation of the male poet Ariwara no Narihira as a *bijin*, the parallel between court and brothel served to validate the art and enterprise of *ukiyo-e*. The allusion to aristocratic love stories provided a glamorous fiction concerning the realities of the pleasure district and the indentured servants, *geisha* (musicians and performers) and *yūjo* (sex workers), who lived there. In classical reference, the indentured courtesans and geishas could be celebrated as the ladies Murasaki and Sei Shōnagon, renowned for their elegant poetry and tasteful

arrangements of dress. The patrons of the *yoshiwara* could imagine themselves to be the romantic, noble Prince Genji, who courted his lovers with poetry. The literary circles of Edo who met in the *yoshiwara* and promoted “the floating world” could style themselves as classical poets. The collectors of *ukiyo-e* could think of themselves as connoisseurs and inheritors of courtly tradition and refinement. Through references to the zenith of Japanese court culture, the ability to read the popular art of *ukiyo-e* was likened to refinements of the aristocracy, blurring the societal boundaries of early modern Japan.

Details of Nature

In addition to *bijinga*, the majority of *ukiyo-e* artists also produced pictures of birds and flowers (*kacho-e*). Although a minor genre, *kacho-e* significantly drew from the long traditions of Chinese and Japanese painting that focused on the details of nature. As in *ukiyo-e* landscapes, the composition and attentive detail of these images echoed the works of official court painters. Like references to classical literature and the Heian court (794-1185), the formal qualities of *kacho-e* as well as the inclusion of classical poetry tied *ukiyo-e* to a prestigious artistic lineage.

In Utagawa Hiroshige’s (1797-1858) *Mallard Duck and Snow-covered Reeds*, the haiku poem inscribed in calligraphic writing, the intricate drawing of the bird’s feathers, and the elongated, asymmetrical composition are suggestive of traditional painting. Although there was no hierarchical division of the arts and crafts in Edo Japan (court painters also executed kimono designs for example) great artistic value was placed on the mastery of materials and the knowledge of flora and fauna. *Ukiyo-e* artists underscored the parallel between their popular prints and court paintings by adding the terms *eshi* (master of picture) and *hitsu* (by the brush of) to their signatures. Toriyama Sekien (1712 –1788), an *ukiyo-e* artist who was trained in the *Kanō* school (court painters

from the late 15th century to the late 19th century), described the artist's mindful observation and representation nature as the ability "to know the truth." Understanding the color and pattern of natural form implied factual knowledge of the subject. Through the careful study of plants and animals, the *ukiyo-e* artist, like the master painter, learned how to see the truth and represent it to the viewer. Hence, *kacho-e*, like traditional painting, was an opportunity for courtly connoisseurship of natural beauty.

This attention to the details of nature was employed throughout *ukiyo-e*. In the Edo Period, textile design drew from traditional painting as well, and the representation of elaborate kimonos in *ukiyo-e* provided a second, interior canvas for the artists to carefully render natural forms. As in this grouping of *kacho-e*, in *bijinga* the depiction of flora and fauna patterns suggested the artist's prolonged study and privileged vantage point. Furthermore, in *bijinga* every strand of the beauty's hair was treated like the flower petals in *kacho-e*, as an object of the natural world from which the artist was to observe and capture the "truth."

Unlikely Stages and the Illusion of Proximity

In the works grouped in this thematic section two common *ukiyo-e* tropes are employed. Here, *bijin* are depicted in improbable scenarios or in their private quarters. Whether in unlikely public settings or in the cloistered interiors of the *yoshiwara* (brothel district), the women in these images are represented in such close detail that it is as if the artist, and consequently viewer, had the vantage point of an intimate voyeur.

In Kitagawa Utamaro's (1753 - 1806) *The Fishing Net*, the viewer is positioned aboard a night fishing boat on the Sumida River. The unlikely party of women who watch the fisherman prepare his net are dressed in garments far too elaborate for the occasion. They stand out as the central focus of the scene. In the case of Utamaro's *On Top and Beneath Ryogoku Bridge*, the viewer is given an

impossible vantage point. Each woman is drawn from a direct, frontal perspective, as if the artist had the leisure to walk along the bridge railing and stop to draw each *bijin* with equal care. *Woman Arranging Hair of Child* by Utagawa Kunisada (Toyokuni III) (1786 - 1864) places the viewer in a similar position of intimacy. Here, the setting of the image is not defined; it is as if the woman was suspended in her daily routine for the viewer's inspection, creating the fantasy that the artist had such access to these women as to know every pattern of their dress and every aspect of the daily routine. In each case, the fictions of these images are supported by the implied proximity and privileged intimacy of the *ukiyo-e* artist. It is as if the artist could wander through the most private sections of the *yoshiwara*.

The illusions cultivated in these images are manifold. During the Edo Period (1615-1868), sumptuary laws extended to the production of *ukiyo-e*. The depiction of women in landscape settings provided a simple veil for the overt eroticism in *bijinga*. Furthermore, the artist's implied knowledge of the inner-life of the licensed pleasure districts served the commercial ends of the publisher and artist alike. The profitability of *ukiyo-e* depended on the public persona of the artist as an insider who could reveal the secrets of the "floating world" to the broader audience of Edo. In turn this intimate view was predicated on the fiction of the artist's authorial gaze.

Work Conserved for Exhibition

Utagawa Hiroshige's (1797-1858) *Cherry Blossoms at Night in the Yoshiwara*, a central work in the thematic section *Sites of Display*, was newly restored for this exhibition. In the Edo Period (1615-1868), *ukiyo-e* were printed in a numerous sizes and qualities, for example, calendar print (*egoyomi*), picture book (*ehon*), print album (*gafu*), theatre program (*banzaku*), toy print (*mameban*, a print size about 4.75 by 3.2 inches), and multiple-sheet prints

(*ōban*). From large, multiple-block prints with arrays of color to single-block prints produced in one tone, *ukiyo-e* were both collected as modestly priced substitutes for paintings and used as inexpensive advertisements. The materials used for *ukiyo-e* prints were initially delicate and were occasionally jeopardized since the prints were often cut out of their album formats or adhered to various surfaces. Many of the older works in this show reflect this history of fragility and change.

Thanks to the generosity of the Friends of the Library, Hiroshige's print *Cherry Blossoms at Night* has been restored by Philadelphia's Conservation Center for Art and Historic Artifacts. In addition to this newly conserved work, several modern reprints were included in this exhibition in order to provide a sense of *ukiyo-e*'s original vibrancy.

Key Japanese terms in *Beneath the Printed Pattern*

Bijin – A beautiful person

Bijinga- Pictures of beautiful people

Chōnin – Merchant and artisan class in feudal Japan

Edo – Present-day Tokyo, capital city of Edo Period (1615-1868)

Edokko – Townspeople of Edo

Edo Period (1615-1868)- Rule of Tokugawa shogun

Geisha – Musicians and performers of licensed pleasure districts

Heian Period (794–1185) – Apex of imperial court culture

Kamakura Period - (1185–1391) Time of intense civil wars and

the rise of the military class in Japan

Kachō-e – Pictures of birds and flowers

Keise – The highest-ranking courtesans of the *yoshiwara*

Kosode - Precursor of the modern-day kimono (the literal translation of kimono is “clothing”)

Nishiki-e - Woodblock print

Mon- Emblematic family crests

Japan’s aristocracy developed an emblematic language of family crests in the Heian Period (794-1185). These symbols were adopted by the military class in the Kamakura Period (1185-1391) and by the rising merchant middleclass in the Edo Period (1615-1868). An integral part of Japan’s history of visual symbolism, there were very few family crests that did not carry specific connotations. For example, the hollyhock (*aoi*) was the crest of the Tokugawa family (shogun line from 1603-1868) and had strong associations with Shinto festivals and shrines. Designs that paired pine, bamboo, and plum (the Three Friends in Winter) symbolized long-life and the cultured gentleman. Crests based on the peony referenced erotic love and female sexuality. For the highly visually literate populace of Edo, these simple patterns would have been meaningful signs.

Tales of Ise – (*Ise monogatari*) - A collection of poems and associated narratives dating from the Heian Period (early years of the 11th century)

The Tale of Genji (*Genji Monogatari*) - a classical work written by the court lady Murasaki Shikibu around the peak of the Heian period (794-1185)

Tōkaidō Road - The major highway constructed in the Edo Period linking Edo and Kyoto

Tokugawa -Shogunal family who ruled from 1603-1868

Shogun - Military ruler of feudal Japan

Sumida River - The main tributary of Edo

Ukiyo – Literally “floating world,” Edo’s licensed brothel and theater district

Ukiyo-e – pictures of the floating world

Yoshiwara – Licensed Brothel district of Edo

Labels for Works referenced in text

Torii Kiyonaga (1752 - 1815)

Hanaogi of the Ogiya, with attendants Yoshino and Tatsuta

Date: unknown

Medium: Woodblock print (*nishiki-e*); ink and color on paper

Ukiyo-e print; *bijinga* (pictures of beautiful people)

Gift of Howard L. Gray, Professor of History, 1915-1940

Bryn Mawr College X.1054



Utagawa Hiroshige (1797-1858)

The Daimaru Dry-goods Store in Ōdenmachō

From the series *Famous Places in Edo (Edo meisho)*

Date: ca.: 1847–52

Medium: Woodblock print (*nishiki-e*); ink and color on paper

Ukiyo-e print; *fūkei-ga* (landscape/cityscape)

Gift of Margery Hoffman Smith, Class of 1911

Bryn Mawr College S.44.FA



Utagawa Hiroshige (1797-1858)

Cherry Blossoms at Night in the Yoshiwara

From the series *Famous Places in the Eastern Capital (tōto meisho)*

Date: ca. 1833-1843

Medium: Woodblock print (*nishiki-e*); ink and color on paper
Ukiyo-e print; *fūkei-ga* (landscape/cityscape)

Bryn Mawr College X.1024



Kitagawa Utamaro (1753 - 1806)

The Fishing Net: Night Scene (left and right panels of triptych)

Date: unknown

Medium: modern reproduction of woodblock print; ink and color on paper

Ukiyo-e print; *bijinga* (pictures of beautiful people)

Bryn Mawr College X.1007; X.1008



Kitagawa Utamaro (1753 - 1806)

On top and beneath Ryogoku Bridge

Date: unknown

Medium: modern reproduction of woodblock print; ink and color on paper

Ukiyo-e print; *bijinga* (pictures of beautiful people)

Gift of Harrington Bishop

Bryn Mawr College 2013.4.20



Utagawa Kunisada (Toyokuni III) (1786 - 1864)

Arranging the Hair

From the series *Fitting Accomplishments for Women (Fujin tashinami-gusa)*

Date: ca.: 1843–47

Medium: Woodblock print (nishiki-e); ink and color on paper
Ukiyo-e print; bijin-ga (pictures of beautiful people)

Bryn Mawr College X.1004

Ariwara no Narihira



Utagawa Hiroshige (1797-1858)

Untitled: Mallard Duck and Snow-covered Reeds

Date: ca.: 1843

Medium: Woodblock print (nishiki-e); ink and color on paper
Ukiyo-e print;

Gift of

Bryn Mawr College X.1001



POEM:

鴨啼や
風吹しはむ
水の面

Kamo naku ya
kaze fuki-shiwamu
mizu no omo

A duck quacks—

as the wind wrinkles
the face of the water.

—Trans. John T. Carpenter

Chobunsai Eishi (1756 - 1829)

Woman as the Poet Ariwara Narihira

Date: Second half of 18th century - early 19th century

Medium: Woodblock print (nishiki-e); ink and color on paper
Ukiyo-e print;

Gift of Margery Hoffman Smith, Class of 1911
Bryn Mawr College S.4.FA

