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## The Impact of the Male Gaze: Femininity and Female Sexuality in Shunga Prints of the Edo Period

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THE IMPACT OF THE MALE GAZE: FEMININITY AND FEMALE SEXUALITY IN  
SHUNGA PRINTS OF THE EDO PERIOD

by

Meredith Keukelaar

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts in Art History and Visual Culture  
at  
Lindenwood University

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THE IMPACT OF THE MALE GAZE: FEMININITY AND FEMALE SEXUALITY IN  
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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the School of Arts, Media, and Communications  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Degree of Master of Arts in Art History and Visual Culture  
at  
Lindenwood University

By

Meredith Keukelaar

Saint Charles, Missouri

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## Abstract

The Edo period of Japan (1603-1868) was a time of great cultural and economic growth as the country flourished from political stability under the Tokugawa clan's rule for over two centuries. During this time, many prints, illustrated books, and paintings were created, the most famous of which are known as *ukiyo-e*, or "pictures of the floating world." A popular sub-genre of *ukiyo-e* were the erotic *shunga* prints, created by and primarily for men. While most of these prints were heterosexual in nature, there were still several works that depicted homosexual relations. The majority were of male homosexuality, but scenes of female homosexual sex are not uncommon. Many scholars have believed these images were created purely for male fantasy and posit that the use of dildos is proof that they were not likely consumed by actual female homosexuals at the time. This thesis visually analyzes the erotic print *Awabi Divers* (1820s) by Katsushika Ōi (1800-1866), Katsushika Hokusai's illustration *Manpuku Wagōjin* (1821), and the illustration *Shunshoku Hana no Shizuku* (late 18<sup>th</sup> to mid 19<sup>th</sup> centuries) by Keisai Eisen (1790-1848). It also examines gender and sexuality in the Edo period and the symbolism common in *ukiyo-e* art at the time to examine the differences in how erotic lesbian pieces made by famous male artists differed from the work of the most famous female printer of the time. This study ultimately shows the impact of the male gaze on female homosexuality in the prints of the Edo Japan.

*Keywords:* Edo Japan, Japanese art, lesbian, queer art, shunga, ukiyo-e

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I would also like to express my gratitude to Dr. James Welker, Professor of Cross-Cultural Studies at Kanagawa University, for sharing both copies of his own articles about the history of lesbianism in Japan with me free of charge, and for offering suggestions and connections for further research on primary sources. His knowledge and support were crucial in my being able to form a proper analysis of female homosexuality in the Edo/Tokugawa era and beyond.

I of course must thank my wife, Sarah, for all her endless support as I went through the graduate program at Lindenwood University. Without her help, I never would have been able to get as far as I have. There have been many hardships faced over the course of the last two and a half years, and she has truly been my rock through all the ups and downs.

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## Introduction

For centuries, the West has been intrigued by the intimacies of Japan, particularly by aspects that would be considered to be “peculiar.”<sup>1</sup> When travelers from Europe were finally allowed to set foot again on Japanese soil in 1859, many ventured to the pleasure district of Edo (modern Tokyo) known as Yoshiwara.<sup>2</sup> They brought tales back to their homelands of a city “for the hedonists, the woman-seekers, the sensual pleasure-hunters of old Japan” and their stories and pictures “created a romantic cult, a dream far from reality.”<sup>3</sup> Westerners became fascinated by the prints of Yoshiwara, known as ukiyo-e (“pictures of the floating world”), which depicted the members of what was referred to as the floating world: beautiful geishas, stunning courtesans, and handsome actors of the kabuki theater.<sup>4</sup> Some of the most popular of the ukiyo-e prints, and certainly some of the most studied since, were images of erotic encounters between the Japanese, now commonly known as shunga (“springtime images”).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Allison Alexy, “Introduction: The Stakes of Intimacy in Contemporary Japan” in *Intimate Jintapan*, ed. Allison Alexy and Emma E. Cook (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai’i Press, 2019), 2.

<sup>2</sup> Europeans initially arrived in Japan in 1543 but were expelled from the country by the Japanese government when they passed the Sakoku policy in 1639. This policy prohibited all foreigners from entering Japanese territory, except for Dutch traders and workers who were permitted to live on Dejima Island. In 1853, the Perry Expedition commanded by Matthew C. Perry forced Japan to open trade with America. This ended in Japan having to create a series of treaties, known as the Convention of Kanagawa, with other western countries, all of which were signed by July of 1958.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen and Ethel Longstreet, *Yoshiwara: Geishas, Courtesans, and the Pleasure Quarters of Old Tokyo* (North Clarendon, VT: Tuttle Publishing, 2009), 6.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Addiss, *How to Look at Japanese Art* (Brattleboro, VT: Echo Point Books and Media, 2015), 95

<sup>5</sup> Christopher Reed, *Art and Homosexuality: A History of Ideas* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011), 29-30.

This essay will analyze the erotic print *Awabi Divers* (1820s) by Katsushika Ōi (1800-1866, fig. 22). This shunga shows two women wrapped in red skirts, engaged in sexual intimacy on the beach. They are touching one another, one woman leaning back against the other, with the waves crashing against them. This print will be compared to Katsushika Hokusai's illustration *Manpuku Wagōjin* (1821, fig. 15), and the illustration *Shunshoku Hana no Shizuku* (late 18<sup>th</sup> to mid-19<sup>th</sup> centuries, fig. 14) by Keisai Eisen (1790-1848). Hokusai's print shows two women, one straddling the others lap, while the other kisses her breast. Another woman watches from behind a screen while she touches her genitals. Eisen's work shows two women engaged in sexual activity while using a double ended toy for penetration. You cannot see their faces and other than their exposed genitals, their bodies are fully clothed. By assessing the differences between these prints, this essay will argue that Ōi's works present a more authentic and less sexualized portrayal of female homosexuality than those of male print makers.

One of the major characteristics of the art of Japan is the focus given to understanding and respecting of all of nature, including that of humans.<sup>6</sup> Pre-modern Japan looked to sex as simply a part of being human, meant to be explored and celebrated due to its association with fertility.<sup>7</sup> Moral ideas of sex focused less on the actual acts and more on the social dynamics that were being performed; in all aspects of life, the Edo Japanese insisted on the strict adherence to societal roles.<sup>8</sup> Shunga was used in a variety of ways: primarily to be used as masturbatory material; to stimulate sex between couples; and to advertise for the courtesans of the Yoshiwara

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<sup>6</sup> Addiss, *Japanese Art*, 8.

<sup>7</sup> Rosina Buckland, *Shunga: Erotic Art In Japan* (New York, NY: The Overlook Press, 2010), 10-11.

<sup>8</sup> James Saslow, "Chapter 4: Asia and Islam: Ancient Cultures, Modern Conflicts" in *Pictures and Passions: A History of Homosexuality in the Visual Arts* (New York, NY: Viking Penguin, 1999), 142.



districts or the variety of sex toys sold in shops.<sup>9</sup> Several scholars over the years have argued that shunga were used for sexual education, as some shunga books contained advice on how to boost pleasure during sex.<sup>10</sup> The majority of the scenes in shunga are loving acts between two consenting adults, sometimes with the addition of a third-party spying on — and at times joining — a couple during their private intimacy. Another large portion of scenes involve the popular courtesan and geishas in the ukiyo districts throughout Japan, particularly Yoshiwara.<sup>11</sup> Female sexuality in shunga did not always have to involve a partner or teach women about their bodies in relation to how they could service men; images of adult female masturbation were relatively popular, as was the private, non-sexual intimacy of courtesans and prostitutes mingling with one another between clients or joining one another in the public baths.<sup>12</sup>

The bulk of shunga imagery is heterosexual, but a substantial number of prints exist depicting homosexuality. Adult men had their choice in sexual partners, able to engage in sexual encounters with women or young boys, usually referred to as *wakashu* (“young person,” always masculine). So long as the elder male was in the dominant position, male homosexuality was generally accepted by Tokugawa society, particularly among the samurai class.<sup>13</sup> Male homosexuality in the Yoshiwara primarily centered around the kabuki theaters, where handsome, young boys played the roles of women and set a baseline of rules for what femininity could be in Tokugawa Japan. These theaters were often found in the ukiyo districts and the actors were also

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<sup>9</sup> Timon Screech, *Sex and the Floating World: Erotic Images in Japan 1700–1820*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (London, UK: Reaktion Books, 2009), Location 301, Kindle.

<sup>10</sup> Buckland, *Shunga*, 13.

<sup>11</sup> Buckland, *Shunga*, 112-116.

<sup>12</sup> Screech, *Sex and the Floating World*, Location 485.

<sup>13</sup> Buckland, *Shunga*, 39.

often male sex workers.<sup>14</sup> There is ample evidence through prints and literature of same-sex relationships thriving between men, and some sources say that within the Yoshiwara districts, they were “boldly public and openly paraded... in the way they are doing at present in large American cities.”<sup>15</sup> By 1780, there were ten famous male brothels in Yoshiwara alone, and approximately 250 male sex workers were available for purchase.<sup>16</sup>

While there has been a heavy focus on male homosexuality in Western studies, female sexuality—both heterosexual and homosexual—still found small corners of representation in the art world, allowing for a minute but strong record of the existence of female homosexual relationships in pre-modern Japan. A district for women seeking female sexual companionship was available in Yoshiwara.<sup>17</sup> Women wrote about sex workers who would come looking for clients and would proposition men and women alike.<sup>18</sup> Lesbian imagery in shunga is considered rare, but not non-existent.<sup>19</sup> Many of these images were created to cater to a male gaze, clearly intended to fulfill the erotic fantasies of men; male artists such as Chōkōsai Eishō (birth and death dates unknown, active in the 1790s) and Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849) included multiple images of female homosexual sex scenes in their shunga prints, usually mimicking the sexual positions and desires of the heterosexual couples they more frequently depicted. Despite being likely created for men, all of these images show the existence of not only female

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<sup>14</sup> Longstreet, *Yoshiwara*, 106.

<sup>15</sup> Longstreet, *Yoshiwara*, 107.

<sup>16</sup> Longstreet, 109.

<sup>17</sup> Saslow, *Pictures and Passions*, 145.

<sup>18</sup> Shiba Keiko, *Literary Creations on the Road: Women's Travel Diaries in Early Modern Japan* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2012), 90.

<sup>19</sup> Buckland, *Shunga*, 39.

homosexual actions, but toys that were designed for just this purpose.<sup>20</sup> The existence of various forms of dildos and strap-on harnesses were far from a secret; many illustrated erotic books would have these toys advertised in the preface, usually with instructions on how they would be used, or with shunga throughout the book giving visual demonstrations of the many possibilities.<sup>21</sup> Some of these toys were advertised and marketed as being specifically for the use between female homosexuals.<sup>22</sup>

Throughout the Tokugawa period, there were multiple censorship laws that put more restrictions on the production and publication of all shunga materials.<sup>23</sup> These laws primarily targeted anything that the bureaucracy believed threatened social order. They prohibited discussion of women's sexuality in literature, specifically female same-sex relationships.<sup>24</sup> Traditionally, Japanese society chose to deal with unwanted minorities by ignoring their existence. Differences are seen as a negative attribute. Japanese society emphasizes that individual needs and wants should not be put before social order, and therefore one should not express desires that are considered socially unacceptable.<sup>25</sup> By prohibiting the depiction of female sexuality and female homosexual relationships, the Tokugawa shogunate sent a message that female homosexuality was something to be ignored and rendered female same-sex desire invisible. These consequences continued through the Meiji (1868-1912) and post-Meiji eras,

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<sup>20</sup> Buckland, 112.

<sup>21</sup> David Pollack, "The Cultural Environment of Edo Shunga," *Impressions*, no. 31 (2010): 79.

<sup>22</sup> Gary P. Leupp, "Capitalism and Homosexuality in Eighteenth-Century Japan," *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques* 33, no. 1 (2007): 151.

<sup>23</sup> Buckland, 34.

<sup>24</sup> Sharon Chalmers, *Emerging Lesbian Voices from Japan* (New York, NY: Routledge Curzon, 2002), 19.

<sup>25</sup> Chalmers, *Emerging Lesbian Voices from Japan*, 2-5.

when modern ideas of homosexuality were starting to be formed.<sup>26</sup> Even today, while queer identities have begun to emerge in Japan and male homosexuality and transgender representation has begun to take a foothold in Japanese media, female homosexuality “remains largely invisible in the public sphere.”<sup>27</sup> This modern day invisibility makes it that much more important to analyze what little imagery that exists of female homosexual intimacy in ukiyo-e and shunga.

To discuss the dynamics of female homosexuality in Japanese erotic prints, it is important to define both concepts. First, I will outline the definitions for what is considered “erotic art.” Defining erotica has never been an easy feat, though many scholars have attempted. To many, erotic and pornographic tend to be nearly synonymous. Andrea Dworkin (1946-2005), an American radical feminist writer and activist, famously stated “[E]rotica is simply high-class pornography.”<sup>28</sup> In the West, both eroticism and pornography have primarily been associated with visual depictions of nudity. In Edo Japan, nudity was considered a part of daily life, with communal bathhouses being a popular gathering place for most citizens.<sup>29</sup> Because of this, the naked body in and of itself was not considered inherently erotic the way it has been in much of European and American art.<sup>30</sup> Many prints give exaggerated focus to the genitals, but the sensuality in scenes was more often directly tied to the expensive material goods or symbolic imagery for intimacy of that was unique to Japanese culture, such as the exposure of the back of

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<sup>26</sup> Chalmers, 26.

<sup>27</sup> S.P.F. Dale, “Gender Identity, Desire, and Intimacy: Sexual Scripts and X-Gender,” in *Intimate Japan*, ed. Allison Alexy and Emma E. Cook (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai’i, 2019), 168.

<sup>28</sup> Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (New York, NY: Plume, 1991), Location 435, Kindle.

<sup>29</sup> Ellis Tinios, “Art, Anatomy and Eroticism: The Human Body in Japanese Illustrated Books of the Edo Period, 1615-1868,” *East Asian Science, Technology, and Medicine*, no. 31 (2010): 46-47.

<sup>30</sup> Tinios, “Art, Anatomy and Eroticism”, 53.

the neck or the bending of the big toe.<sup>31</sup> Because of these differences, in this essay, “erotic prints” will be defined as any ukiyo-e or shunga which depict strong signs of romantic or sexual intimacy between two people of any gender. Intimacy will be looked to in the most straightforward of terms, involving actions “framed through bonds of love and/or sexual desire and contact.”<sup>32</sup> While these terms may seem broad, they make sure that none of the referenced imagery within my analysis, which have all been historically marked as “erotic”, fail to meet these outlined definitions.

When defining homosexuality, a distinction must be made between the modern and the pre-modern concepts of sexual orientations. The core basis for the studies of gender and sexuality in the modern West is a focus on identity; the queer community is made up of several individuals who see their sexualities and genders as being more than an act, but a core aspect of who they are. In modern day Japan, many of these concepts have carried over from the West due to the ease of access in sharing information via the media and the internet.<sup>33</sup> In Tokugawa Japan, we have a very different picture. Like most pre-modern societies, the Edo period saw homosexuality as an activity rather than a fixed identity, as society had very little sense of individual ‘identity’ at all.<sup>34</sup> This meant that while some may have been what would now be designated bisexual, at the time they would still be referred to with the same words as

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<sup>31</sup> Pollack, “The Cultural Environment”, 76-77.

<sup>32</sup> Alexy, “Introduction”, 6.

<sup>33</sup> Chalmers, 53.

<sup>34</sup> Screech, Location 1331-1334.

homosexuals.<sup>35</sup> Rather than try to ascribe modern day labels to a pre-modern society, “homosexuality” in the context of this essay will refer to any erotic acts depicting two people who are visibly the same biological sex.

By analyzing Ōi’s prints against her male peers, considering gender and sexuality in the Edo period, and the symbolism common in *ukiyo-e* art at the time, this essay will prove how erotic lesbian pieces made by famous male artists differed from the work of the most famous female printer of the time. A thorough investigation of the historical background on shunga will help to give each work context within the Edo period. In my conclusion, this analysis ultimately shows the impact of the male gaze on female homosexuality in the prints of the Edo Japan.

## **Literature Review & Methodology**

### **I. Modern & Historical Representations of Sexuality in Japan**

While there has been ample research on the ukiyo-e prints known as shunga, little has been conducted on the representation of female sexuality, particularly same-sex relationships between females, and how they were presented in this popular erotic imagery of the Tokugawa era of Japan. While shunga portrays women as equal partners partaking in consensual and enjoyable sex, they were primarily created by men and thus framed in the context of male fantasy. Same-sex scenes between women were not uncommon, but nearly always included the use of a dildo to simulate heterosexual sexual fantasies.<sup>36</sup> These heterosexist ideas of female sexuality were a means to circumvent the rules stated in Tokugawa literature which prohibited

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<sup>35</sup> Labels for sexuality are constantly evolving and so it should be noted that “bisexual” is not the only term used today for persons who are attracted to more than one gender. For the sake of brevity, I will not include all multi-gendered attractions in this essay.

<sup>36</sup> Buckland, *Shunga*, 39.

references to women's sexuality and female same-sex relationships specifically, implicating the idea that "female pleasure always remains dependent on and presumed only to be fulfilled by vaginal penetration."<sup>37</sup> The following literature review is organized by topic and then (roughly) by chronological order for ease. Much of this thesis also relied on English language scholarship and most of the Japanese books and articles that were used were also previously translated by other Western scholars. While multiple sources were consulted for translations, as few Japanese words have direct English equivalents, acknowledgement must be made for potential bias when translating Japanese into English.

The modern concept of lesbianism and the idea of a lesbian history did not begin until the 1990s, when there was an increase in the visibility of the LGBT+ community in Japan and around the world. Kakefuda Hiroko released her coming out story and critical analysis on lesbianism in Japan in her book *On Being a "Lesbian"* ("Rezubian" *de aru to iu koto*) in 1992 and Lillian Faderman's *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* (1991) was given a Japanese translation in 1996 titled *Rezubian no rekishi*, or "lesbian history." Through the 90s and early 2000s, people began to dive into the idea of a full-fledged history of same-sex attraction. In 1999, art historian James Saslow released *Pictures and Passions: A History of Homosexuality in the Visual Arts*. This in-depth history of same-sex relationships throughout art from ancient Greece to contemporary works provided visual proof of the existence of same-sex physical and emotional relationships long before the modern concepts of queer identities. Like most Western based art history, Saslow condensed all non-Western art into one section titled "Asia and Islam: Ancient Cultures, Modern Conflicts." Japan's history of

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<sup>37</sup> Chalmers, *Emerging Lesbian Voices*, 19.

art was given a small focus in this twenty-five-page chapter focusing on shunga as proof of same-sex relations, primarily between men. He states that “[l]ittle evidence of lesbianism surfaced before the seventh century,” and those that did surface through the Edo period depicted female homosexual sex with a phallic focus, simulating male pleasure.<sup>38</sup> Despite this heteronormative framing, these ukiyo-e prints did offer some visibility into the lifestyle of female homosexuals in Tokugawa Japan. While brief, Saslow gives a solid beginning for the exploration of female sexuality in pre-modern Japanese artworks.

Published in 2003, historian Louis Crompton’s book *Homosexuality & Civilization* provides a look at the history of same-sex attraction around the world, offering more analysis of non-Western countries than Saslow. Using ukiyo-e and shunga imagery as well as the history of the kabuki theatres, Crompton provides an excellent timeline for the invention of nanshoku or “male love.” Again, early ideas of same sex female attraction are left by the wayside; however, Crompton writes a detailed discussion on the misogyny in pre-Meiji Japan that fueled the denial of female sexuality and ultimately led men to favor the feminine sexuality of youthful actors known as onnagatta. In Ihara Saikaku’s *The Great Mirror of Male Love (Nanshoku Ōkagami)*, we are given evidence of a subculture of Japanese men who called themselves onna-girai or “women haters” who considered themselves completely exclusive in their attractions to men.<sup>39</sup>

Multiple articles were released during the early 2000s that focused on the rising interests in the study of sexuality; Linda Garber’s 2005 article “Where in the World Are the Lesbians?”,

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<sup>38</sup> Saslow, *Pictures and Passions*, 140.

<sup>39</sup> Louis Crompton, *Homosexuality & Civilization* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, 2003), 438.



published in the *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, discusses how the history of queer studies has focused on the voices of gay men:

Despite queer theory's female luminaries, most notably Judith Butler and Eve Sedwick, its favored theoretical points of reference...and most famous subjects...consistently were men. ... For all its insightful theorizing about the performance of gender, queer theory came rather late to talking about lesbians...<sup>40</sup>

Garber provides a frame of reference for why it is the history of lesbianism is lacking, discussing the impacts of sexism within queer studies, and offering advice on further exploration into the history of lesbianism in the pre-modern era. There is no arguing that the post-modern construction of an LGBT identity allowed for easier reflection of same-sex relations in history. Frank Episale's article "Gender, Tradition, and Culture in Translation: Reading the 'Onnagata' in English" and Maki Isaka's book *Onnagata: A Labyrinth of Gendering in Kabuki Theater* both delve into the idea of gender expression, male homosexuality, and the idea of a pre-modern concept of gender identity in the kabuki onnagata.<sup>41</sup> These sources provide an idea of gender constructs in the Edo Period, and what was and was not acceptable for men and for sexual relationships at the time.<sup>42</sup> In Rachel Dumas' "Historicizing Japan's Abject Femininity: Reading Women's Bodies in 'Nihon Ryoiki,'" she discusses how women have been viewed historically in Japanese media, focusing on how these visual representations often subverted normal cultural values and portrayed the female body in a light of both desire and disgust.<sup>43</sup> She analyzes how

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<sup>40</sup> Linda Garber, "Where in the World Are the Lesbians?" *Journal of the History of Sexuality* January-April (2005): 30, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3704708?seq=1>.

<sup>41</sup> Frank Episale, "Gender, Tradition, and Culture in Translation: Reading the 'Onnagata' in English," *Asian Theatre Journal* 29, no.1 (2012), <http://www.jstor.com/stable/23359546>

<sup>42</sup> Maki Isaka, *Onnagata: A Labyrinth of Gendering In Kabuki Theater* (University of Washington Press: Seattle, WA, 2016), 55.

<sup>43</sup> Raechel Dumas, "Historicizing Japan's Abject Femininity: Reading Women's Bodies in 'Nihon ryoiki,'" *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 40, no. 2 (2013), <http://www.jstor.com/stable/23595655>.

the female body was viewed through Buddhism and female spirituality, the emphasis on self-sacrifice that was given to women in these religious circles, and how women's chastity was both valued and seen as up for negotiation among Japanese men. Having a basis for how men viewed women sexually throughout Japanese history gives a better understanding for the way that the male gaze may have impacted prints of female homosexuality in the Edo period.

By the late 2000s, more scholars were starting to explore the idea of pre-modern homosexuality in Edo Japan and how gender constructions were related to economics and social status. Gary Leupp's article "Capitalism and Homosexuality in Eighteenth-Century Japan" also brings up the kabuki theater as well as the influence of "samurai homosexuality" in his discussion of class politics that influenced sexuality in Tokugawa Japan.<sup>44</sup> Again, he fails to bring up the impacts this had on female homosexuality, despite the increased patronage of prostitution in the Yoshiwara district and other districts like it that saw an economic boom during the Edo period. In his article, he primarily reflects on male homosexuality and dedicates only two paragraphs to the idea of female homosexuality, citing the lack of information on "premodern and early modern female-female sexuality in Japan."<sup>45</sup> "The Cultural Environment of Edo Shunga," by David Pollack, provides information on the cultural expectations of men and women as well as the attitudes toward sexuality in Edo Japan. He discusses "the cultural environment of desire" in regard to its legal status, the economy, and the way it is presented in theatre.<sup>46</sup> Laura Nenzi's book, *Excursions in Identity: Travel and the Intersection of Place, Gender, and Status in Edo Japan*, gives an even more in-depth look into the way economic and

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<sup>44</sup> Leupp, "Capitalism and Homosexuality," 140.

<sup>45</sup> Leupp, 152.

<sup>46</sup> Pollack, "The Cultural Environment", 73.

social status influenced gender identity and gender roles.<sup>47</sup> The book has entire sections dedicated to the idea of female gender expectations in Edo Japan and how changing demographics and economics impacted women's roles, but it still dedicates little to the idea of female homosexuality in pre-modern Japan.

When the queer movement failed to recognize female homosexuality within its early modern studies, the reading of "lesbian" relationships in pre-modern Japan became limited as well. A small collection of articles and books published in the last thirty years have given us some insight into the idea of feminine sexuality in Japan. Ayako Hattori's short guide "Heterosexism and Women's Lives in Japan," published in 1999, gives us an understanding of how female sexuality, particularly female homosexuality, has been silenced in Japan's male and heterocentric culture.<sup>48</sup> Sharon Chalmers' *Emerging Lesbian Voices from Japan* was one of the first books that showcased the stories of female homosexuals when it was published in 2002 and, since then, is still one of the only prominent sources of information on the modern culture of Japanese lesbians.<sup>49</sup> Sachiko Ishino and Naeko Wakabayashi's book, *Japan*, in 2003 covers the history of lesbian activism in modern Japanese society, covering topics such as lesbians within the media, discriminatory policies in law, and the pressures of marriage.<sup>50</sup> James Welker, an American born professor teaching at Kanagawa University, is one of the leading researchers in how lesbianism in Japan exists today and how it can be applied to pre-modern Japanese societies.

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<sup>47</sup> Laura Nenzi, *Excursions in Identity: Travel and the Intersection of Place, Gender, and Status in Edo Japan* (University of Hawai'i Press: Honolulu, HI, 2008).

<sup>48</sup> Ayako Hattori, "Heterosexism and Women's Lives in Japan," *Off Our Backs*, 29, no. 10 (1999), 5-7, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20836484>.

<sup>49</sup> Sharon Chalmers, *Emerging Voices*.

<sup>50</sup> Sachiko Ishino and Naeko Wakabayashi, "Japan: Lesbian Activism," *IGLHRC Book*, (2003), <https://outrightinternational.org/sites/default/files/47-2.pdf>, 97-99.

His articles— “Beautiful, Borrowed, and Bent: ‘Boys’ Love’ as Girls’ Love in Shojo Manga,” “Telling Her Story: Narrating a Japanese Lesbian Community,” and “Toward a History of ‘Lesbian History’”— all provide excellent analyses of the lesbian community, lesbian iconography in modern Japanese media, and how to apply these ideas to seventeenth to nineteenth century Japanese books and artworks to provide us with a possible idea of female homosexuality in pre-Meiji Japan.<sup>51</sup> Like Welker, Fujimoto Yukari analyzes lesbian representation in popular culture in “Where Is My Place in the World? Early Shojo Manga Portrayals of Lesbianism.” Again, Yukari offers how female homosexuality has been visually portrayed in a Japanese context and gives more information on how these visual elements and storytelling techniques are derived from historical Japanese art.<sup>52</sup> An emphasis on darker themes, masculine/feminine dynamics, and the idea that all women will someday want to be loved by a man are messages which have been seen in stories of female love in Japan for centuries. These ideas being so prevalent show the impact of male sexual desires on female-only spaces. Mark McLelland’s “From Sailor-Suits to Sadists: ‘Lesbos Love’ as Reflected in Japan’s Postwar ‘Perverse Press’” analyzes the submissions of stories about lesbian carnal desire that were submitted to five different “perverse magazines” (hentai zasshi) during the 1950s and discusses how while these articles were clearly written for “the titillation of the male audience... there are

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<sup>51</sup> James Welker, “Beautiful, Borrowed, and Bent: ‘Boys’ Love’ as Girls’ Love in Shojo Manga,” *Signs: New Feminist Theories of Visual Cultures* 31, no. 3 (2006): 841-870. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/498987>; James Welker, “From Women’s Liberation to Lesbian Feminism in Japan: Rezubian Feminizumi Within the and Beyond the Uman Ribu Movement in the 1970s and 1980s,” in *Rethinking Japanese Feminism*, ed. Julia C. Bullock, Ayako Kano, and James Welker (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai’i Press, 2017, Kindle) 50-67; James Welker, “Telling Her Story: Narrating a Japanese Lesbian Community,” *Japanstudien* 16, no. 1 (2005) <https://doi.org/10.1080/09386491.2005.11826914>, 119-144; James Welker, “Toward a History of ‘Lesbian History’ in Japan,” *Japan Culture, Theory, and Critique*, 58, no. 2 (2017), 147-165, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14735784.2017.1282830>

<sup>52</sup> Fujimoto Yukari, and translated by Lucy Fraser, “Where Is My Place in the World? Early Shōjo Manga Portrayals of Lesbianism,” *Mechademia* 9 (2014), 25-42, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/mech.9.2014.0025>

moments when women's experience is visible.”<sup>53</sup> McLelland's points give a solid foundation for how to look at Japanese media and dissect where the male gaze ends and where women's same-sex experiences and desire for representation begins.

Studying erotica in Japan requires a knowledge of how intimacy is viewed in Japanese society. It is important to understand the impact that cultural differences and the idea of orientalism have had on the way the “Far East” is viewed by Westerners. America has frequently published works on Japanese sexuality that frame it as strange, perverse, or unusual.<sup>54</sup> Rather than “othering” these intimacies through Western accounts of intimacy, a better understanding can be gained through studying the stories of romantic relationships that come directly from Japan. *Intimate Japan* has several articles that discuss the differing levels of intimate relationships, including both heterosexual and homosexual relationships, as well as relationships between family members and how adoption has been used to create family units throughout Japanese history.<sup>55</sup> S.P.F. Dale's “Gender Identity, Desire, and Intimacy: Sexual Scripts and X-Gender” tells the stories of several different people who identify as the non-binary gender identity “X-Gender” and the overlaps between the trans (toransu) identity and a person's sexuality (sekushuaritei) in Japanese society. A particular focus is given to how the invisibility of female homosexuality in Japan has left many women feeling isolated and how the tie between rezubian and lesbian pornography has caused many women to feel incapable of identifying themselves as lesbians. All individuals interviewed in the text stated that they did not feel their

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<sup>53</sup> Mark McLelland, “From Sailor-Suits to Sadists: ‘Lesbos Love’ as Reflected in Japan's Postwar ‘Perverse Press’”, *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal*, no. 27 (2004), 27-28, <http://www.jstor.com/stable/42771918>

<sup>54</sup> Alexy, “Introduction,” 2.

<sup>55</sup> *Intimate Japan*, ed. Allison Alexy and Emma E. Cook, (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2019).

intimate lives matched the bodies they saw represented as lesbians in Japanese media. Dale does not discredit the gender identity of any particular individual, and many of the female-to-X (FTX) and female-to-male (FTM) subjects they interviewed admitted to how homophobia had influenced their decision to disidentify with their assigned female sex.<sup>56</sup> Elizabeth Miles' contribution to *Intimate Japan*, "Manhood and the Burdens of Intimacy," discusses how toxic masculinity and ideals of femininity have impacted relationships in Japan. She covers the pressures of romantic holidays such as Valentine's and White Day as well as the expectations placed on Japanese youth to enter heterosexual relationships in order to "fulfill natal family obligations."<sup>57</sup> Laura Dales' and Beverley Anne Yamamoto's "Romantic and Sexual Intimacy before and beyond Marriage" and Allison Alexy's "What Can Be Said? Communicating Intimacy in Millennial Japan" both focus on how intimate relationships in heterosexual monogamous relationships are strained by Japanese expectations surrounding affection, causing many relationships to suffer or fail. Dales and Yamamoto discuss how varying gender roles of men and women create specific dynamics within heterosexual families, particularly in the absent bread winner husband and the submissive stay-at-home wife, as well as covering the ways in which modern couples have started to try and subvert these expectations.<sup>58</sup> Alexy's article covers the multiple ways that love is expressed in the Japanese language and how each subtle change

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<sup>56</sup> Dale, "Gender Identity," 171

<sup>57</sup> Elizabeth Miles, "Manhood and the Burdens of Intimacy" in *Intimate Japan*, ed. Allison Alexy and Emma E. Cook (University of Hawai'i Press: Honolulu, HI, 2019), 160-1: On Valentine's Day, women are the ones who give men chocolates to show their love and appreciation. In Japan (as well as other east Asian countries such as China and Korea), on March 14<sup>th</sup>, men will return the affections by giving back chocolates to the person who gave them to him.

<sup>58</sup> Laura Dales and Beverley Anne Yamamoto, "Romantic and Sexual Intimacy before and beyond Marriage," in *Intimate Japan*, ed. Allison Alexy and Emma E. Cook (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2019), 73-90

impacts the way someone would receive the message.<sup>59</sup> She also covers the non-verbal communications of love and gives an idea for the visual elements that would be used to express intimacy between two individuals. This can help to identify the subtle cultural ideas around intimate touches that would be used in Japanese prints, allowing a better analyzation for female same-sex relations and the level of intimacy being shared between each figure.

To get a better understanding of female homosexuality, studying pre-Meiji cultural expectations, Edo period gender divisions, and the general views on sexuality in Tokugawa Japan are all equally important. In the last decade, there have been multiple articles that focus on the history of women and femininity in Japan. Saskia E. Wieringa's article, "Silence, Sin, and the System: Women's Same-Sex Practices in Japan," in the book *Women's Sexualities and Masculinities in a Globalizing Asia* poses the question "What then is this 'system that, with silence as one of its major tools of surveillance... ignores women's same-sex desires and allows 'demons' to destroy lesbian relations?'"<sup>60</sup> She looks into how the erasure of lesbians from cultural studies has created "deeper layers of guilt, sin, and shame surrounding lesbian sexuality."<sup>61</sup> Wieringa also goes over a history of same-sex practices of both men and women in various religions throughout Japanese history, such as Shintoism and Buddhism, as well as discussing the highlights of the sociohistorical elements of same-sex love during the Edo and Meiji periods, providing information on how wives and female sex workers engaged in same-sex relations with

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<sup>59</sup> Allison Alexy, "What Can Be Said?: Communicating Intimacy in Millennial Japan," in *Intimate Japan*, ed. Allison Alexy and Emma E. Cook (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2019), 91-111.

<sup>60</sup> Saskia E. Wieringa, "Silence, Sin, and the System: Women's Same-Sex Practices in Japan" in *Women's Sexualities and Masculinities in Globalizing Asia*, ed. by Saskia E. Wieringa, Evelyn Blackwood, and Abha Bhaiya (Palgrave MacMillan: New York, NY, 2007), 23.

<sup>61</sup> Wieringa, "Silence, Sin, and the System," 24.

one another in brothels, breaking gender roles and dressing as men in order to meet with one another in private. *Women, Gender, and Art in Asia, c. 1500-1900* has several articles that focus on the unique history of female artists in Eastern Asian societies.<sup>62</sup> Fister’s article in the book, “Creating Art in Japan’s Imperial Buddhist Convents”, examines the placement of young imperial daughters into convents at young ages who were then raised to know “classical poetry and literature as well as writing with a brush.”<sup>63</sup> These women were also taught to paint and many nuns would depict subjects that were “of a more personal and private nature.”<sup>64</sup> She focuses on a handful of these women who produced particularly influential works, such as Kozan Soei, Tokugon Riho, and Shozan Gen’yo to discuss how many of the female artists of Imperial and Edo Japan were able to create their artworks while living in these convents. Another article in the book, “Women Who Crossed the Cordon” by Ikumi Kaminishi, covers how the artistic performers would “sell sex for monetary contributions to their religious cause (kanjin).”<sup>65</sup> Some of these religious women gained funds by using prints which they would sell to female audiences, teaching them about both Buddha and sexuality at once.<sup>66</sup> In Miriam Wattles contribution to *Women, Gender and Art*, she gives an in-depth analysis of illustrator Watanabe Seitei’s hanging scroll *Asazuma Boat* (1895).<sup>67</sup> This artwork depicts a type of sex-worker who

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<sup>62</sup> Ed. Melia Belli Bose, *Women Gender and Art in Asia, c. 1500-1900* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2018), 147-171.

<sup>63</sup> Patricia Fister, “Creating Art in Japan’s Imperial Buddhist Convents: Devotional Practice and Cultural Pastime” in *Women, Gender and Art in Asia, c. 1500-1900*, ed. by Melia Belli Bose (Routledge: New York, NY, 2018), 148.

<sup>64</sup> Fister, “Creating Art,” 151.

<sup>65</sup> Ikumi Kaminishi, “Women Who Crossed the Cordon” in *Women, Gender and Art in Asia, c. 1500-1900*, ed. by Melia Belli Bose (Routledge: New York, NY, 2018), 321.

<sup>66</sup> Kaminishi, “Women Who Crossed the Cordon,” 323-324.

<sup>67</sup> Miriam Wattles, “A Multi-gendered Scandal: The Survival of the Prostitute Meme, *Asazuma Boat*,” in *Women, Gender ad Art in Asia, c. 1500-1900*, ed. Melia Belli Bose (New York, NY: Routledge, 2018), 343-368.



frequented the rivers and ports in China, and whose musical performances were the basis for the dance performed by male kabuki dancers. The gender ambiguity of the figures is a focal point of Wattles' discussion, an emphasis on the neither male nor female like appearances of the sex-worker, and the history of gender ambiguity in similar prints from the Edo Period. "Properly Female: Illustrated Books of Morals for Women in Edo Japan" by Elizabeth Lillehoj, discusses the genre of literature created for Edo period Japanese women which served as guides for how to be a proper and moral woman. These guides were heavily influenced by patriarchal ideologies and Lillehoj discusses how the male gaze impacted the prints that were being created for these guides. She also covers the rise in consumerism from middle-class women in the Edo period as more women began to work outside the home and publishers were motivated to create more printed material for women, including erotic literature.<sup>68</sup>

Ellis Tinios' article, "Art, Anatomy, and Eroticism: The Human Body in Japanese Illustrated Books of the Edo Period, 1615-1868," gives an in-depth analysis of how the human body and the differences between the sexes were differentiated in Tokugawa ukiyo-e prints.<sup>69</sup> This aids in determining when a figure is male or female, which can be challenging given the androgynous forms in shunga. "Historicizing Japan's Abject Femininity: Reading Women's Bodies in 'Nihon ryoiki'" by Raechel Dumas, "Sexuality, Textuality, and the Definition of the 'Feminine' in Late Eighteenth-Century Japan" by Susan Griswold, and Rebecca Corbett's book *Cultivating Femininity: Women and Tea Culture in Edo and Meiji Japan* provide background

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<sup>68</sup> Elizabeth Lillehoj, "Properly Female: Illustrated Books of Morals for Women in Edo Japan" in *Women, Gender and Art in Asia, c. 1500-1900*, ed. Melia Belli Bose (Routledge: New York, NY, 2018), 230-231.

<sup>69</sup> Ellis Tinios, "Art, Anatomy and Eroticism: The Human Body in Japanese Illustrated Books of the Edo Period, 1615-1868," *East Asian Science, Technology, and Medicine*, no. 31 (2010) <http://www.jstor.com/stable/43150765>, 44-63.

information on the gendered expectations of women in Edo period Japan.<sup>70</sup> All three authors discuss how Tokugawa Japan had become far more materialistic and engrossed in capitalism. This created a culture that had “increased emphasis on the commodification of its subjects, particularly women.”<sup>71</sup> The messages sent to women were that they should be submissive, be available for men’s consumption, and recognize that they inhabited an inferior position compared to men around them. Their roles were divided into that of the mother and the prostitute, of purity and sexual availability to men and men alone. They also discuss how the ideal feminine form was created off what men decided women were meant to be. They reference how this is most prominently shown through the role the kabuki theater played in forming the idea of the ideal woman in their portrayal of female roles by the onnagata. Griswold puts it best when she says:

Tokugawa was, arguably, a time when a discourse of the feminine most pervasively preoccupied Japanese society, and yet women were denied any active participation in the creation of that discourse... Although women were denied participation in the creation of the discourse of the feminine in Tokugawa, they were expected to conform to, and perform in daily practice, the rigidly prescribed forms of feminine status and conduct prescribed by men.<sup>72</sup>

In a similar vein, Corbett discusses how much of women’s history in Edo Japan has been dismissed or ignored entirely due to the distinctions of formal practices versus informal; a lack of

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<sup>70</sup> Rebecca Corbett, *Cultivating Femininity: Women and Tea Culture in Edo and Meiji Japan* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai’i Press, 2018); Raechel Dumas, “Historicizing Japan’s Abject Femininity: Reading Women’s Bodies in ‘Nihon ryoiki,’” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 40, no. 2 (2013) <http://www.jstor.com/stable/23595655>, 247-275; Susan Griswold, “Sexuality, Textuality, and the Definition of the ‘Feminine’ in Late Eighteenth-Century Japan,” *U.S.-Japan Women’s Journal. English Supplement*, no. 9 (1995), <http://www.jstor.com/stable/42772085>, 59-76.

<sup>71</sup> Susan Griswold, “Sexuality, Textuality, and the Definition of the ‘Feminine’ in Late Eighteenth-Century Japan,” *U.S.-Japan Women’s Journal. English Supplement*, no. 9 (1995), 59, <http://www.jstor.com/stable/42772085>.

<sup>72</sup> Griswold, “Sexuality, Textuality,” 59-60.

formal education in any subject, from tea ceremonies to producing art and literature, made it easy to see women's participation in these events as irrelevant.<sup>73</sup>

Keiko Shiba's book *Literary Creations on the Road: Women's Travel Diaries in Early Modern Japan* is a collection of letters and diary excerpts made by Japanese women and gives a more personal account of the expectations placed on women's shoulders and the emotional tolls they took.<sup>74</sup> For centuries in Japan, women had been advised that their place was in the home, and they were confined to domestic work while men traveled to make money. In the Edo period, while this was still predominantly true, the world became more focused on mobility; subsequently, women began to find more ways to leave the home and travel the roads of Tokugawa Japan. Using reasons such as education, religion, entertainment, women were now crossing borders at a much higher rate than in any other period before. These women discovered new places, experiences, and people on their journeys, and many of the letters included in the book show the bonds these women formed with one another and hints at the romance that may have lingered underneath, giving us a glimpse at female homosexual relationships in pre-modern Japan. Some of the relationships brought up are between prostitutes and women they attempted to gain as patrons. To learn more about sex workers in Edo Japan, we look to *Yoshiwara: Geishas, Courtesans, and the Pleasure Quarters of Old Tokyo* by Stephen Longstreet.<sup>75</sup> This book gives an in-depth history of the Yoshiwara district of Edo Japan, providing a deeper

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<sup>73</sup> Rebecca Corbett, *Cultivating Femininity: Women and Tea Culture in Edo and Meiji Japan* (University of Hawai'i Press: Honolulu, HI, 2018), Location 217, Kindle.

<sup>74</sup> Keiko Shiba, *Literary Creations on the Road: Women's Travel Diaries in Early Modern Japan* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2012).

<sup>75</sup> Stephen and Ethel Longstreet, *Yoshiwara: Geishas, Courtesans, and the Pleasure Quarters of Old Tokyo* (North Clarendon, VT: Tuttle Publishing, 2009).

understanding of the history of sex work in Japanese society. While there is little dedication to female homosexuality, it discusses the expectations of geishas and courtesans, the sexual expectations of women in the Edo period and the way “proper” women interacted with the Yoshiwara district, and the establishment of homosexual brothels.

The Yoshiwara district was well known for selling all things erotic; this included erotic prints, which give modern viewers a look at the way sexuality was viewed in Edo Japan. Shunga in Tokugawa Japan was considered another branch of ukiyo-e; in order to properly study shunga, it’s a necessity to research the popular art of woodblock printing to understand the themes of shunga and how they are being presented artistically. *Japanese Woodblock Prints* by Anders Marks gives a general background in the making of ukiyo-e prints, how they were created, and the iconography that was well known to the people of Edo Japan.<sup>76</sup> Stephen Addis’ *How to Look at Japanese Art* gives an even more detailed account on the symbolism used in these prints as well as the storytelling methods that were executed through them.<sup>77</sup> Gender roles were easily distinguished through visual elements that nearly every viewer at the time would have been aware of, such as style of hair, the types of kimonos worn, and the patterns used in the cloth. These books also discuss the way that femininity was used to make young boys appear more like women in the prints that depicted male homosexuality and why these choices were required to pass censorship laws. This gives a better idea on how censorship impacted the creation of lesbian art, even by female artists, and gives us a further look into how the male gaze dictated the way women and female homosexuality would be viewed. “Interpreting Sexual Imagery in Japanese

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<sup>76</sup> Andreas Marks, *Japanese Woodblock Prints: Artists, Publishers, and Masterworks 1680-1900* (North Clarendon, VT: Tuttle Publishing, 2010).

<sup>77</sup> Stephen Addis, *How to Look at Japanese Art* (Brattleboro, VT: Echo Point Books and Media, 2015).

Prints: A Fresh Approach to Hokusai's 'Diver and Two Octopi'" by Danielle Talerico gives an in-depth analysis of one of the most famous shunga works by Hokusai.<sup>78</sup> Talerico provides background information on the history of female divers, the context of the story written in the print, showcases the history of sea creatures being used in Japanese prints to represent various forms of sexuality, and discusses the symbolism used in *Diver and Two Octopi* to convey messages about sexuality in Tokugawa Japan. Prints of divers are often the subject of female sex-practices in Edo period prints, and so Talerico's insight is particularly helpful in learning how to analyze these sexually explicit scenes.

The erotic imagery of shunga reflects the ideas of sexuality in Tokugawa Japan. There are multiple resources available to learn more about the history of sexuality as a broadened, general topic in order to properly understand the imagery presented in shunga. "Rethinking 'Shunga': The Interpretation of Sexual Imagery of the Edo Period" by Paul Berry and "The Nation-State, the Age/Gender System, and Reconstitution of Erotic Desire in Nineteenth-Century Japan" by Gregory M. Pflugfelder discuss the eroticism in society, including within shunga prints, as it would have been seen in Tokugawa Japan.<sup>79</sup> A popular theme within shunga is sex work and the way that men partook in it. Courtesans are one of the most popular subjects portrayed in shunga prints, right after marital relationships and adultery. Monta Hayakawa and C. Andrew Gerstle's "Who Were the Audiences of 'Shunga?'" discusses the target audiences of

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<sup>78</sup> Danielle Talerico, "Interpreting Sexual Imagery in Japanese Prints: A Fresh Approach to Hokusai's 'Diver and Two Octopi,'" *Impressions*, no. 23 (2002), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42597891>, 24-41.

<sup>79</sup> Paul Berry, "Rethinking 'Shunga': The Interpretation of Sexual Imagery of the Edo Period," *Archives of Asian Art* 54 (2004) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20111313>, 7-22.

shunga prints based on the imagery presented.<sup>80</sup> The article also discusses the likelihood that the books of shunga prints passed through the hands of women in a time when acknowledging female sexuality wasn't considered proper. Timothy Clark's "Prostitute as Bodhisattva: The Eguchi Theme in Ukiyo-e" identifies the common Buddhist deities and legends that were often used in ukiyo-e prints.<sup>81</sup> These figures would have been well known to the people of Edo Japan and the use of sex workers in the place of bodhisattvas would have been easily distinguished as parodies. As humor was a prominent form of expression in most Japanese art, parodies are one of the most popular genres within ukiyo-e and shunga prints. One example of this is given in "As a Vessel of the Dharma, I am a Woman: A Visual Parody from Nineteenth-Century Japan" by Gail F. Chin. Chin gives a detailed analysis of a woodblock print by Shokyokasai Kuniteru called *Tainai jikkai no zu* (Diagram of the Ten Worlds Within the Body) and discusses how popular culture and parody were used to discuss the roles of women in Tokugawa Japan.<sup>82</sup> Rosina Buckland's *Shunga: Erotic Art in Japan*, Timothy Clark's *Shunga: Sex and Pleasure in Japanese Art* and Timon Screech's *Sex and the Floating World: Erotic Images in Japan, 1700-1820* all analyze dozens of shunga prints, giving detailed information on the iconography, the common myths, and legends, and discuss what erotic imagery was primarily used for within Edo Japan: expanding knowledge about sexual practices and, more often than not, for self-pleasure.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Monta Hayakawa and C. Andrew Gerstle, "Who Were the Audiences for 'Shunga?'" *Japan Review* 2013, no. 26 (2013), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41959815>, 17-36.

<sup>81</sup> Timothy Clark, "Prostitute as Bodhisattva: The Eguchi Theme in Ukiyo-e," *Impressions*, no. 22 (2000) <http://www.jstor.com/stable/42597883>, 36-53.

<sup>82</sup> Gail F. Chin, "As a Vessel of the Dharma, I am a Woman: A Visual Parody from Nineteenth-Century Japan," *Artibus Asiae* 74, no. 1 (2014), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24241096>, 221-236.

<sup>83</sup> Rosina Buckland, *Shunga: Erotic Art in Japan* (London, United Kingdom: The British Museum Press, 2010); ed. Timothy Clark, C. Andrew Gerstle, Aki Ishigami, and Akiko Yano, *Shunga: Sex and Pleasure in Japanese Art* (London, United Kingdom: The British Museum, 2013); Timon Screech, *Sex and the Floating World: Erotic Images in Japan, 1700-1820* 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (London, United Kingdom: Reaktion Books Ltd., 2009).

While these books give a strong understanding of the history of sex and shunga in Japan, they once again fail to bring up female homosexuality as more than a passing nod in most cases but do give examples of prints depicting lesbian relationships from well-known artists such as Hokusai and Chōkōsai Eishō. With so many printers active at the time, this provided a starting point for more in depth looks at the collections of those who acknowledged female homosexuality, even if only from a heterosexist point of view.

Combining these texts on a whole allows us to analyze shunga prints on a new level. Understanding the history of femininity, the cultural expectations of women, the societal views on homosexuality, and the historical silencing of same sex attracted female voices are all necessary background knowledge in order to fully understand how female sexuality was portrayed in Edo period shunga prints. Using the already established knowledge of the iconography of erotic imagery, as well as the subtle imagery used to convey romance, allows us to better understand the ways in which Edo Japanese artists would have portrayed female homosexual love in a time that would have rather ignored its existence.

## II. Visual Constructions of Tokugawa Femininity

A peerlessly beautiful girl of 16 was neither too fat nor too thin, neither too tall nor too short. Her face was oval like a melon-seed, and her complexion fair and white. Her eyes were narrow and bright, her teeth small and even, her nose was aquiline, and her mouth delicately formed, with lovely red lips. Her eyebrows were long and fine. She had a profusion of long black hair. She spoke modestly, with a soft, sweet voice...<sup>84</sup>

The quote above describes the ideal beauty written about in the old text *Tales of Old Japan*. Tokugawa Japan was a culture of strict gender roles and segregation. While expectations varied

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<sup>84</sup> Longfellow, 81

by class, men of all rankings were given the privilege of getting to define the sociopolitical discussions on what created “masculinity” versus “femininity.” Meanwhile, women were “stripped of their agency” in getting to define womanhood.<sup>85</sup> The ruling regime and warrior classes, merchants, and artisans saw their maleness represented as a sex ruled by strength, morality, and rationality. Femininity, subsequently, was seen as lacking the traits of men; due to their anatomy, women were seen as being incapable of possessing these virtues and needing to be kept under strict control.<sup>86</sup> Despite not being allowed to partake in the discussion on what was expected of their feminine roles, women had to perform these practices and strictly adhere to their roles.<sup>87</sup> These expectations were often solidified in imagery through ukiyo-e and shunga prints.

An instruction booklet was given to teach the women of Yoshiwara how to dress. A white silk undershirt was put on first, followed by white socks. Undergarments were tied with a waist-tie and under sash. A robe was slipped on from right side to left and closed tightly with a waist-tie just below the natural waistline. Women had to pull the cloth into place so that the robe would barely cover the heels. An obi was wound around the waist two times and tied behind, with the longer end above the knot and the shorter end below it. They then had to fold the longer end over the obi-bustle which was wrapped in a bustle sash. The sash was then tied in the front, tucked into the ends of the obi. The long end of the obi was tucked under a tube and the short end was put inside. These were all tightened with an obi-tie which would then be tied tightly in the

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<sup>85</sup> Frank Episale, “Gender, Tradition, and Culture in Translation: Reading the ‘Onnagata’ in English,” *Asian Theatre Journal*, 29, no.1 (2012), 97, <http://www.jstor.com/stable/23359546>

<sup>86</sup> Episale, “Gender, Tradition, and Culture,” 60-64.

<sup>87</sup> Griswold, 60.



front.<sup>88</sup> The shoes the women wore were often difficult to move in and “walking developed a pattern of its own among courtesans, geishas, and high-born ladies.”<sup>89</sup> Townsend Harris, an American observing the Yoshiwara once the borders of Japan opened to foreigners again, wrote: “She minces her steps as tho her legs were tied together at the knees.”<sup>90</sup> This walk was called *nukiashi chu-binera* or “grace footed sway-hips in voluptuous movings.”<sup>91</sup> The tight binding from the *obis* “were the characteristics of a Yoshiwara beauty.”<sup>92</sup> The white skin, white neck, bound small breasts “that became invisible through the many layers of silk” were part of the “Japanese dream.”<sup>93</sup> These instructions and symbols of beauty were well known to artists who would use them to accurately portray the women of the Yoshiwara in their prints and make them easily distinguishable to viewers.<sup>94</sup>

Ukiyo-e played a large role in spreading these ideal forms of femininity in a visual medium that most in Edo Japan could afford. Many of the subjects of these prints were the “beautiful courtesans and handsome kabuki actors” of the Yoshiwara district.<sup>95</sup> *Girl Viewing Plum Blossoms at Night* (fig. 1) by Suzuki Harunobu (1725-1770) shows a young woman on a veranda as she holds up a lantern to see the blossoms on the tree. She is shown to be beautiful, delicate,

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<sup>88</sup> Longstreet, 117.

<sup>89</sup> Longstreet, 117.

<sup>90</sup> Longstreet, 117.

<sup>91</sup> Longstreet, 117.

<sup>92</sup> Longstreet, 118.

<sup>93</sup> Longstreet, 118.

<sup>94</sup> Griswold, 69.

<sup>95</sup> Addiss, *How to Look at Japanese Art*: 95.

fragile, and curved. Even the paper and the colors used to produce the print are of a delicate nature to emphasize the femininity within the figure. Her childlike features and slender wrists portray the ideal beauty of women in Harunobu's generation.<sup>96</sup> While Harunobu emphasized her femininity in many ways, the bodies of men and women were nearly indistinguishable in most of ukiyo-e; outside of shunga, genitals were usually hidden, and women's breasts were barely emphasized.<sup>97</sup> Hairstyles and, if the figures were dressed, became extremely important as the distinguishing features of men and women, as how a person dressed him or herself and styled their hair was seen to make them the "true representative of that gender."<sup>98</sup> The woman's long, hanging sleeves are an important marker to indicate her youth and her elaborate garments emphasize her status as a desirable woman. As married women shaved their eyebrows and painted their teeth black, we can assume that she is single, and thus available for the consumption of men.<sup>99</sup>

In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, these full-length pictures developed into half-length, close-up portraits (okubi-e), with more emphasis given to women's "refined manners."<sup>100</sup> These close ups also allowed artists to focus more heavily on a range of emotional expressions to emphasize the ideal feminine beauty.<sup>101</sup> We see this manifest the most in two distinct roles: the mother and the courtesan. Kitigawa Utamaruo (1753-1806) became well known for his sensual and elegant

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<sup>96</sup> Addiss, 98-99.

<sup>97</sup> Tinios, "Art, Anatomy, and Eroticism", 49.

<sup>98</sup> Screech, Location 1515.

<sup>99</sup> Buckland, 49.

<sup>100</sup> Andreas Marks, *Japanese Woodblock Prints: Artists, Publishers and Masterworks 1680-1900* (Tuttle Publishing: North Clarendon, VT, 2010), 17.

<sup>101</sup> Addis, 100.

portrayals of women.<sup>102</sup> In his work *Mother Breast-Feeding Her Child* (fig. 2) from his series *Famous Scenic Places, Twelve Types of Beautiful Women* (*Meisho Fukei, Bijin Juni So*) we see Utamaro focus on the ideal beauty of motherhood. The very term for “femaleness” (*josei*) is tied to the word for maternity (*bosei*) and it was believed that women could only find satisfaction in life once they became a mother.<sup>103</sup> Her shaved eyebrows and black teeth indicate her status as a wife and proper mother, and we see her in the most intimate act with her child as she feeds them and plays lovingly with their feet. Her expression is one of adoration, the way any good mother would be expected to look at her child. Utamaro still emphasizes her physical beauty: she is given the ideal hairline across her brow that is shaped like a half moon, her eyes are almond shaped and moist, her lips are a desirable shade of red, her skin white as snow. She still wears a stylish comb at the top of her hair and her clothing is still made from beautifully patterned cloth. All of these were the distinguishing characteristics of the ideal feminine woman.<sup>104</sup>

In Utamaro’s work *Teppo* (fig. 3), we see how the male gaze has altered the ideal feminine beauty since Harunobu’s work in the 1760s. Utamaro portrays a lower courtesan woman (*teppo*) who is “taller, more robust, more mature, and full of individual feelings and emotion.”<sup>105</sup> The *teppo* has tousled hair, her breasts are exposed, and between her perfect red lips is a tissue. These visuals all indicate she has had a recent sexual encounter which she is cleaning herself up

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<sup>102</sup> Marks, *Japanese Woodblock Prints*, 76.

<sup>103</sup> Wieringa, 24-25.

<sup>104</sup> Tinios, “Art, Anatomy, and Eroticism,” 60-61.

<sup>105</sup> Addis, 100.

after.<sup>106</sup> The monetary worth of a sex worker was determined by her position in Yoshiwara.<sup>107</sup> Because Utamaro is showing a courtesan who is lower in status, her pose is less elegant than that of the mother discussed above, or the higher courtesans that Utamaro would often illustrate.<sup>108</sup>

The ideals of femininity and masculinity were both well known throughout Edo Japan. They were shown just as much through visual elements as they were in behaviors. These visual elements help us to determine in ukiyo-e prints when a character is male versus female and allows us to better understand when a print is being made of heterosexuality, homosexuality, or in rare instances, is left completely ambiguous. It also makes it easier to determine their occupation and their rank, allowing us to better interpret the context of a print.<sup>109</sup>

### **III. Depictions of the Floating World**

#### *A. Ukiyo-e: Culture, Characters, & Symbolism*

The art of ukiyo-e developed from Yamato-e, a Japanese-style painting, which also links it to the Chinese-style of painting known as Kara-e. All ukiyo-e artists were trained to use a brush in the same way as painters. In the artistic discourse of the Edo period, they were referenced in the same categories as paintings, and were never actually referred to as prints (*hanga*).<sup>110</sup> Modern scholarship has often taken the study of ukiyo-e less seriously than that of other artistic fields.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Addis, 100.

<sup>107</sup> Griswold, 65.

<sup>108</sup> Buckland, 41.

<sup>109</sup> Tinios, "Art, Anatomy, and Eroticism," 59.

<sup>110</sup> Julie Nelson Davis, *Picturing the Floating World: Ukiyo-e in Context* (University of Hawai'i Press: Honolulu, HI, 2021), 25-26.

<sup>111</sup> Davis, *Ukiyo-e in Context*, 9.

Addiss claims in his book *How to Look at Japanese Art* that “[ukiyo-e prints] were not collected seriously until the past few decades.”<sup>112</sup> It’s often assumed by art historians that the West were the “first” to recognize the artistic qualities of ukiyo-e.<sup>113</sup> These same historians claim that the Japanese collectors regarded them as “too approachable, too plebian, too sexy, and too much fun for the kind of higher-minded study” that some academics would prefer.<sup>114</sup> However, Julie Neslon Davis’ recent book *Picturing the Floating World: Ukiyo-e in Context* claims that “[u]kiyo-e things were appreciated in their own time, collected, and put into albums and boxes.”<sup>115</sup> Europeans and North Americans had collected a large number of these prints and many of the ukiyo-e sheets that we see in exhibits have been separated from their larger collections.<sup>116</sup> While single-sheet compositions were popular before the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, prints were more commonly sold in books with several designs rather than as stand-alone images and taking a single print out from the context of the book can sometimes alter their impact or their intended visual meanings. Davis uses the famous Hokusai print *The Great Wave* (c. 1831) as an example, noting that its original title is *Under the Wave off Kanagawa* (*Kanagawa oki nami ura*), a print that was part of the series *Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji* (*Fugaku sanjurokkei*). It is taken out of its intended context and separated from being a variation on a theme, altering the focus of the print.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Addis, 95.

<sup>113</sup> Marks, 9.

<sup>114</sup> Davis, 3

<sup>115</sup> Davis, 9.

<sup>116</sup> Marks, 9.

<sup>117</sup> Davis, 3.

How the image is read also differs depending on the way it is perceived culturally. How our eyes take in an image is culturally constructed, as we read images in the same way that we read the layouts of books. In the West, we read horizontally from left to right, whereas in Japan, text is usually written vertically and written from right to left. As this would have been the standard way of reading in Hokusai's time, the original print was intended to be viewed from the top right to the lower left, the same way that one would read the text written on any *ukiyo-e* print. Davis gives a detailed description of how altering the directional impact of the image also alters the feeling that the image itself evokes:

Turning back to *Under the Wave off Kanagawa* and looking at it again, now using the top-to-bottom, right-to-left method that Hokusai's viewers would have used, we begin with the swelling form of the next wave and slide with the boat full of men crouching in the hull down into the valley between the waves. Our point of view is under the cresting wave, its mass of energy rising above us. The crab claw tendrils of the spilling breaker reach toward our fragile craft, and we shrink under its impending peril; we see that the boat leeward of us might also be consumed by a smaller wave swelling like a mountain of water. (Note Hokusai's deliberate compositional parallel between this smaller wave and the mountain itself.) Our boats might slip through the waves if our crew is skillful enough. Behind us, Mount Fuki is a secure, eternal presence, but its solid ground is too distant, now more memory than presence.<sup>118</sup>

Where audiences in the West have read the image with sublime admiration, almost missing the boat rocking between the waves entirely, the Japanese and other cultures who read with top-to-bottom, right-to-left styles see it as holding the terrifying power of the ocean and its ability to inflict complete destruction. This is one of the many ways in which culture can impact the intended meanings of an image, even in something like visual analysis which has historically been seen as a somewhat objective way of looking at art.

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<sup>118</sup> Davis, 6.

One characteristic largely featured in Japanese art is a deep respect and desire to portray all forms of nature, including human nature. Natural materials were used to create much of the artwork in Japan and impacted its value, such as the type of clay that was used to create a ceramic vase, or the quality of the wood used in a sculpture. Likewise, in woodblock prints, the texture of the wood being left in the ink of the print was part of its overall aesthetic and was thought to complete the image.<sup>119</sup> Another important characteristic was the way that empty space could be used within a composition, often focusing on asymmetry. According to Addis, “[s]ymmetry often implies rationality and timeless balance, while the asymmetry and open space of Japanese art can suggest emotion and a sense of movement and change.”<sup>120</sup> This empty space was combined with vivid colors, simplistic ink strokes, creating contrasts in art that were viewed as being valuable to the “human experience.”<sup>121</sup>

A final trait of Japanese art, particularly important to ukiyo-e and even more so to shunga, was the use of humor and playfulness. “[We] are all regarded as foolish and wise, good and bad, in equal measure, and Japanese art teaches us to laugh at ourselves so as not to feel superior to all the other sentient beings with whom we share the earth.”<sup>122</sup> The love of humor takes a particularly ironic approach to the analysis of erotic imagery as these images were often called warai-e, or “laughing pictures”, with laughter being another term used for masturbation in Edo Japan.<sup>123</sup> Satire and parody were common themes in ukiyo-e and shunga, and text was often

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<sup>119</sup> Addis, 8.

<sup>120</sup> Addis, 9.

<sup>121</sup> Addis, 9.

<sup>122</sup> Addis, 9.

<sup>123</sup> Screech, Location 160.

added to prints with witty dialogue in order to give context to the images we see.<sup>124</sup> The concept of ukiyo, the floating world, came from Buddhist teachings that human experiences such as joy, pleasure, and desire are transient. While this was supposed to teach that detachment from worldly cravings would lead to enlightenment, the “hedonistic” culture of Edo Japan gave it a new twist; if pleasure is only momentary, then enjoy it to its fullest while it appears.<sup>125</sup> Humor and pleasure became intertwined, making it natural for these illustrated books to show people from all walks of life, living contemporary lives, partaking in the newest fashion, viewing beautiful courtesans and kabuki actors, and engaging in erotic encounters.<sup>126</sup>

Figuring out the characters portrayed in these encounters required understanding many visual characteristics that were deeply ingrained in Edo Japanese culture. Men and women in ukiyo-e were often physically indistinguishable from one another, especially when their genitals were not shown in the image. This made hairstyles and clothing highly important for telling the sexes and classes apart in prints.<sup>127</sup> Men shaved the tops of their heads with young men (*wakashu*) sporting forelocks that were cut off once they reached adulthood. The onnagata would keep these forelocks for much longer to keep their youthful, feminine appearance while they portrayed women on stage. The forelock would be combed over the shaved portion of the top of the head to mimic the full head of hair that women were allowed to keep. Another means of distinguishing men and women were the kimonos they wore; women usually had longer sleeves and more elaborate designs on their kimonos. *Wakashu* would also wear feminine kimonos with longer

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<sup>124</sup> Screech, Location 2939.

<sup>125</sup> Marks, 9.

<sup>126</sup> Davis, 32.

<sup>127</sup> Tinios, “Art, Anatomy, and Eroticism,” 49.



sleeves, which made recognizing the use of the forelocks essential for telling the difference between women and youthful, effeminate men.<sup>128</sup> Features on female figures were meant to portray the most desirable women. Tinios describes the distinguishing physical characteristics that were listed in Keisai Eisen's *Erotic Library, Part Two (Makura bunko, ni hen)*:

... a hair-line across the brow that is like the shape of the moon; a brow that is a clear mirror; eyebrows that are brilliant crescent moons; eyes that are moist like dew; lips that are like a present wrapped in red paper; breasts that are flat and as white as snow; a belly that is flat and smooth; pudenda that are like streamed white bun; hips that are like a willow tree blown by a storm; heels that are like a round red plus; and so forth.<sup>129</sup>

This list shows how ukiyo-e both replicated the beauty trends of the time as well as contributing to the social constructs of femininity discussed earlier in this essay.

Distinguishing class and/or profession is often more straight forward than distinguishing gender. Samurai were recognizable by the swords that were nearly always on their person (or lying nearby if the scene was more erotic). Sex workers were notable by their obis which were always tied in front, their rank in the Yoshiwara shown by how expensive the fabrics of their kimono appeared. The fully shaved heads and dark robes of monks gave away their position easily.<sup>130</sup> Actor prints were made as souvenirs for audience members to take home and show their experience at the theater, each performer identified by their personal crests (mon) and with nigao-e ("likeness pictures") meant to show "the unique personality and individuality of an actor."<sup>131</sup> These class differences were used to create a master/servant, higher/lower class dynamic in romantic pictures, showing the older, high classed individual as the dominant party

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<sup>128</sup> Davis, 38-39.

<sup>129</sup> Tinios, "Art, Anatomy and Eroticism," 60-61.

<sup>130</sup> Davis, 56.

<sup>131</sup> Marks, 17.

and the younger, lower classed individual as the submissive, particularly in prints that showcased nanshoku and same-sex female relationships. This helped to establish the heterosexist views on homosexual relationships, keeping them in line with the expected social hierarchies in romance.<sup>132</sup>

Another set of popular imagery in ukiyo-e is religious and mythical figures and characters from popular fiction or legends. This is done in several ways; one is to make the subject of the print religious or local mythology or a classical story, such as the numerous prints made from Lady Murasaki's 11<sup>th</sup> century novel, *The Tale of Genji*. Another was to incorporate these characters in the means of parody or creating characters with imagery that would imply they were a stand-in for another famous figure. A popular print that represents this last technique is *Woman Riding a Flying Crane* (1765), by Suzuki Harunobu (1725-1770) (fig. 9). A daisho egoyomi, or calendar print, was a popular single sheet print that was made for each month of the Edo-period calendar. These calendars adhered to a solar calendar for the length of the year and a lunar calendar for the months.<sup>133</sup> Religious imagery was highly effective for incorporating information into the design that would help to distinguish which month of the year the print was meant to represent. In *Woman Riding a Flying Crane*, the composition substitutes the woman for the Taoist immortal Fei Zhangfang, who is often seen riding on the back of a crane while pouring over a list. In this print, the woman is lifting her hand to place the pin in her right hand into her hair, a list unfurling in front of her that has puns for the long months of 1765 written on it. It

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<sup>132</sup> Wieringa, 34.

<sup>133</sup> Davis, 61.

includes the first, second, fifth, sixth, eighth, and tenth months; Edo viewers would have been aware that there were no short months on this sheet.<sup>134</sup>

The people of Tokugawa Japan would have been well-aware of these common themes and iconography shown in ukiyo-e. As an art form whose far reaching success came mostly from popular culture references, it only made sense that these prints would rely on imagery based in already well-known figures and themes.<sup>135</sup> By keeping the symbology and characters from classic Japanese painting, ukiyo-e wasn't required to invent ways to communicate with their audiences and simply brought artistic images that were previously viewed only by the elite to the common public.

#### *B. Shunga: Consumers, Uses, & Themes of Erotic Imagery*

With the commercialization of non-erotic ukiyo-e, the rise in popularity of shunga was unsurprising. Already connected to the sex work district of Yoshiwara, retailers of printed books were quick to realize that sex sells and began to display erotic works in their stores regularly.<sup>136</sup> Shunga was viewed and owned by men and women of all ages and classes, borrowed among friends, and popular with commercial book-lenders across the country.<sup>137</sup> Shunga books were so popular with book-lenders that there were warnings pasted inside that would warn borrowers that if the book was sent back damaged, they would be fined.<sup>138</sup> The genre was treated with enough

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<sup>134</sup> Davis, 62.

<sup>135</sup> Marks, 10.

<sup>136</sup> Davis, 34.

<sup>137</sup> Hayakawa Monta, "Who were the Audiences for *Shunga*?" In *Shunga: Sex and Pleasure in Japanese Art*, ed. Timothy Clark, C. Andrew Gerstle, Aki Ishigami, and Akiko Yano (The British Museum: London, UK, 2013), 34.

<sup>138</sup> Clark, "What Was *Shunga*?", 29.

respect to have had multiple printed books with elaborately decorated covers, ones that surpassed the adornment put on other non-erotic printed books that were being published at the same time.<sup>139</sup> In Ellis Tinios' essay, "Erotic Books as Luxury Goods," he discusses the fine design elements that went into shunga during the Edo period:

In addition to the fine designs and virtuoso block-cutting evident in most shunpon [another term for erotic works in Japan], luxury shunpon are printed on thicker, better-quality paper and display an astonishing array of brilliantly executed printing effects. Among the outstanding technical features of these books are: deeply saturated hues achieved by repeated printing from the same colour block; broad areas of subtly gradated colour created through the differential application of the pigment block; lavish use of rare and expensive pigments; enrichment by the application of metallic powders, ground shell, lacquer, mica, mother-of-pearl, and even gold-leaf to the printed surface; and extensive use of blind printing and burnishing to produce textured and lustrous surfaces.<sup>140</sup>

This shows the dedication and money that was put into erotic printing in Tokugawa Japan and that they were seen as luxury items worthy of being owned by the upper classes.

In his book, *Sex and the Floating World*, Timothy Screech spends much of the first chapter laying out the argument that the primary use of shunga was for masturbatory purposes for young men, much like modern pornography today.<sup>141</sup> Other academics, including Japanese academics, have asserted that while masturbation was certainly *a* use for shunga, it was not necessarily the sole purpose for the consumption of erotic work, nor were young men were the only ones to consume shunga regularly.<sup>142</sup> Yanagisawa Kien (1704-1758) was the senior councilor of the Yamato fief. He was also a shunga enthusiast during the Edo period under the literary name

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<sup>139</sup> Ellis Tinios, "Erotic Books as Luxury Goods," In *Shunga: Sex and Pleasure in Japanese Art*, ed. Timothy Clark, C. Andrew Gerstle, Aki Ishigami, and Akiko Yano (The British Museum: London, UK, 2013), 158.

<sup>140</sup> Tinios, "Erotic Books as Luxury Goods," 159.

<sup>141</sup> Screech, Location 506.

<sup>142</sup> Clark, "What Was Shunga?", 28; Monta "Audiences of *Shunga*?", 35-36.

Ryūikyō. In his book *Hitori ne*, he states: “After reading difficult [Chinese] works and struggling to write, when you are tired it is a good idea to read shunga. It will allow you to relax and make your heart full.”<sup>143</sup> Edo period texts drew ideas from Confucian and Neo-Confucian works from China and Korea.<sup>144</sup> Chinese chunhua provided early inspiration for shunga in Japan. These Chinese sex manuals were originally brought to Japan as medical texts.<sup>145</sup> The word shunga was originally used to describe erotic pictures that were chunhua, where the original Japanese creations tended to be called makura-e (“pillow picture”), warai-e (“laughing picture”), or osokuzu no e (“reclining picture”). The shunga book, *Kōso myōron (Marvellous Discourses of the Yellow Emperor and the Maiden, 16<sup>th</sup> century)*, is a Japanese translation of the Chinese sex manual, *Sunü mialun* (1536). This book “explains the art of lovemaking” through a conversation where the Yellow Emperor asks an immortal Maiden the secret to living such a long life.<sup>146</sup> In the text, the Emperor relates heaven and earth and the creation of everything to sex between a man and a woman. This fundamental idea was passed down to Japanese erotic prints, which “set male-female mutual harmony and pleasure as its core philosophy.”<sup>147</sup>

With their roots in Chinese sex manuals, it makes sense that shunga would continue to be used to instruct women on sexual relations in Japan. Many of the manuals written for women contained few, if any, references to sex. Those that do paint it in a negative light, with passages instructing women that “if you have too much sexual desire [shikiyoku], you won’t get pregnant;

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<sup>143</sup> Monta, “Audiences of *Shunga*?”, 44.

<sup>144</sup> Lillehoj, 230.

<sup>145</sup> Ishigami Aki, “Chinese *Chuhua* and Japanese *Shunga*,” In *Shunga: Sex and Pleasure in Japanese Art*, ed. Timothy Clark, C. Andrew Gerstle, Aki Ishigami, and Akiko Yano (The British Museum: London, UK, 2013), 94.

<sup>146</sup> Aki, “Chinese *Chuhua*”, 95.

<sup>147</sup> Aki, “Chinese *Chuhua*”, 98-99.

if you are too wildly passionate [inran], you won't get pregnant.”<sup>148</sup> In contrast, the parodies created by shunga artists would often challenge Confucian-based texts for women, choosing to not only acknowledge that women could be sexual, but that they could enjoy sex as well.<sup>149</sup> These instructions were meant to be presented to women when they married and much of the surviving information we have on shunga today holds many examples of this purpose.<sup>150</sup> A senryū verse discusses the humor in people attempting to recreate the exaggerated positions of shunga in bed: “A foolish couple / copy the shunga / spraining a wrist.”<sup>151</sup> Another set discusses new brides and their shunga they received as gifts: “She steals a look / at the pillow picture / behind her bridal sleeve”; “The bride's secret source / is a ‘pillow book’ / with brilliant painted colours.”<sup>152</sup> Mitamura Engyo (1870-1952) wrote in 1925 that “sets of twelve shunga would always be included in the bride's trousseau” as they were seen as talismans for good and intimate sex, fertility, and promoting the success of a household.<sup>153</sup> Granddaughter of the last shogun, Hachisuka Toshiko (1896-1970), recalled how at fourteen, a lady-in-waiting helped to prepare her for married life by showing her a shunga handscroll.<sup>154</sup> Hayawaka Monta states that received letters and phone calls from “women over the age of eighty” who were asking what to do with their shunga that they received from their mother on their wedding day, but could not pass them

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<sup>148</sup> C. Andrew Gerstle, “*Shunga* and Parody,” In *Shunga: Sex and Pleasure in Japanese Art*, ed. Timothy Clark, C. Andrew Gerstle, Aki Ishigami, and Akiko Yano (The British Museum: London, UK, 2013) 328.

<sup>149</sup> Gerstle, “*Shunga* and Parody,” 327.

<sup>150</sup> Yamamoto Yukari, “Traditional Uses of *Shunga*,” In *Shunga: Sex and Pleasure in Japanese Art*, ed. Timothy Clark, C. Andrew Gerstle, Aki Ishigami, and Akiko Yano (The British Museum: London, UK, 2013), 296.

<sup>151</sup> Yukari, “Traditional Uses of *Shunga*,” 296.

<sup>152</sup> Yukari, 296.

<sup>153</sup> Monta, “Audiences of *Shunga*?”, 37.

<sup>154</sup> Buckland, 16.

on to their own daughters as the custom had disappeared in the last fifty years.<sup>155</sup> Taking in the words of Edo writers themselves and their descendants, a popular use for shunga was clearly as sexual guides.

It has also been speculated that women viewed shunga outside of those presented to them as wedding gifts. In his 1783 diary, the retired lord Yanagisawa Nobutoki wrote that he sent his wife Oryū “A pair of screens decorated with ‘stone prints’ (ishizuri-e) and five volumes of the ‘Mame’emon (sic) book” suggesting that erotic books were being circulated among upper-class women.<sup>156</sup> In old copies of some shunga books, particularly those about love, there are passages that are “marked off as precious” and the structure of these markings suggest they are made by Yoshiwara’s female readers.<sup>157</sup> Women viewing shunga was normalized in poetry, prints, and plays. In the performance of *Kanadehon Chūshingura* (*Treasury of Loyal Retainers*, 1748), the merchant Amakawayama Ghei runs up to a box that soldiers are opening to inspect and sits down on it to stop them. He then says: “This long box contains personal articles ordered by the wife of a certain lord, including shunga books and sex toys. Her name is written on each article, even on the order for the erotic materials.”<sup>158</sup> It was perfectly believed by the soldiers, showing how a samurai lord’s wife ordering erotic books and toys wasn’t considered abnormal to them. Comical haikus known as senryū show how *shunga* is viewed by ordinary people. One from *Yanagidaru*, volume 132 (1833) reads: “On her wedding day / The princess-bride, for the first time/ Breaks

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<sup>155</sup> Monta, “Audiences of *Shunga*?”, 37-38.

<sup>156</sup> Clark, “What Was *Shunga*?”, 30.

<sup>157</sup> Longstreet, 202.

<sup>158</sup> Monta, “Audiences of *Shunga*?”, 36.

the seal on the shunga wrapper.”<sup>159</sup> Another from volume 77 (1823) reads: “Looking at shunga / The lord’s ladies, like the ‘rocks offshore’, / Are wet below, out of sight.”<sup>160</sup> The phrase “rocks offshore” is a clear metaphor used often in shunga during the Edo period to indicate that a woman’s vagina is in an aroused state, that it is “wet,” as indicated by the final line that they “are wet below, out of sight.”<sup>161</sup> Both senryū above showcase high-class women who are looking at shunga and sexually stimulated by the contents.

The women of the household were in-charge of selecting the titles as they were usually the ones who were home when book-lenders and sellers would come by. Shunga had become highly popular in Edo culture and many copies of erotic titles were found in book-trade catalogues from 1685 to 1715, and again in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century until the end of the Edo period in 1868.<sup>162</sup> This meant wives had easy access to shunga, as erotica was in high demand and lenders would charge an extra premium for them.<sup>163</sup> It was believed that “harmonious social order would not be achieved” unless everyone in the clan adopted Confucian ideals, and so women were expected to read as much as men.<sup>164</sup> Women had begun to work more frequently and had extra income to spend, which they would often put towards books from sellers and lenders. This motivated

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<sup>159</sup> Monta, “Audiences of *Shunga*?”, 37.

<sup>160</sup> Monta, “Audiences of *Shunga*?”, 37.

<sup>161</sup> Monta, “Audiences of *Shunga*?”, 37.

<sup>162</sup> Laura Moretti, “The Distribution and Circulation of Erotic Prints and Books in the Edo Period,” In *Shunga: Sex and Pleasure in Japanese Art*, ed. Timothy Clark, C. Andrew Gerstle, Aki Ishigami, and Akiko Yano (The British Museum: London, UK, 2013), 303.

<sup>163</sup> Monta, “Audiences of *Shunga*?”, 38

<sup>164</sup> Lillehoj, 230.



publishers to make books targeted towards women.<sup>165</sup> Popular shunga artists also made Edo moral guides for women and so female purchasers would already have been familiar with the work of ukiyo-e creators such as Hishikawa Moronobu.<sup>166</sup> Shunga, like ukiyo-e, made references to popular literature, including these moral guides, and used humorous puns based on these stories that would have been understood by and intended for female readers, given that male readers were less likely to have read the guides.<sup>167</sup> One example is the women's moral book, *Onna Daigaku Takara-Bako* (*Treasure Chest of Great Learning for Women*, 1716), which was highly popular during the Edo period. A sexual parody of it was released in 1755 called *Onna Dairaku Takara-Beki* (*Great Pleasures for Women and their Treasure Boxes*). The title as well as the contents of the book were based on playful reinterpretations of the guide, such as encouraging married couples to have mutually satisfying sex, with statements such as: "If one of you has an orgasm, the other will get pleasure too."<sup>168</sup>

Another popular target for shunga parodies was Lady Murasaki's *The Tale of Genji*, with both single sheet erotic pictures as well as a full books being produced.<sup>169</sup> The original story of *Genji* was widely read and appreciated by young women of the Edo period, due to both the fantasy elements of the stories and illustrations, and the idea that it was considered "a prerequisite for ideal womanhood" to be educated in Japanese classical literature.<sup>170</sup> *Genji* had

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<sup>165</sup> Lillehoj, 231.

<sup>166</sup> Lillehoj, 238.

<sup>167</sup> Buckland, 51.

<sup>168</sup> Clark, "What Was *Shunga*?", 30.

<sup>169</sup> Satō Satoru, "The *Tale of Genji* in *Shunga*," In *Shunga: Sex and Pleasure in Japanese Art*, ed. Timothy Clark, C. Andrew Gerstle, Aki Ishigami, and Akiko Yano (The British Museum: London, UK, 2013), 228.

<sup>170</sup> Lillehoj, 239-240.

already been popular in Japanese painting for centuries. There were ornately patterned handscrolls, the calligraphy of the novels interspersed with images that would help to tell the story, both illustrations and text each meant to add “a distinct level of meaning to those viewers familiar with the conventions of society during an elegant era in Japanese life.”<sup>171</sup> The original tale was written in the 11<sup>th</sup> century and the classical language of the story was difficult for the average reader in Edo Japan to fully understand.<sup>172</sup> Multiple adaptations were made to help readers appreciate this classic text including detailed synopses, such as *Genji Bin-Kagami* (*Pocket Genji*, 1660); illustrated editions, such as *E-Iri Genji Monogatari* (*Illustrated Tale of Genji*, Yamamoto Shunshō, 1654); commentaries, such as *Kogetsushō* (*Moon on the Lake*, 1675); annotated editions with illustrations, such as *Osana Genji* (*A Young Person’s Genji*, Kamigata (Kyoko-Osaka), 1661 and Edo, 1672); and translations into Edo Japanese, such as *Wakakusa Genji Monogatari* (*A Young Grasses Version of the Tale of Genji*, Okumura Masanobu, 1707).<sup>173</sup>

*The Tale of Genji* was already seen as a book that was filled with irogonomi (sensuality and amorousness) due to its classical aesthetic.<sup>174</sup> One of the most famous editions was the book *Edo Murasaki, Yoshiwara Genji* (c. 1830-1844), illustrated by Utagawa Kuniyoshi. Kuniyoshi references a popular ukiyo-e edition in his first illustration, *Nise Murasaki inaka Genji* (*A Country Genji by a Fake Mursaki*, Ryūtei Taneiko, c. 1829-1842) which was illustrated by the

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<sup>171</sup> Addis, 56.

<sup>172</sup> Satoru, “The Tale of Genji in Shunga,” 228.

<sup>173</sup> Satoru, 228.

<sup>174</sup> Satoru, 229.

famous print artist, Utagawa Kunisada (1786-1864).<sup>175</sup> Another popular shunga rendition of *Genji is Enshi Gojūyo Jō* (*Amourous Murasaki Finds Pleasure in Fifty-Some Chapters*, 1835) which is illustrated by Kunisada as well. One illustration (fig. 10) from this version strongly shows how he carries over the same themes from ukiyo-e that were popular into his shunga illustrations as well. In this picture, we see a man and a woman with their fabrics moved to the side so that he can penetrate her from behind. The position of her leg in front of his shoulder is used to create the depth and let the viewer know this isn't a standard "missionary position" between the couple, as realistic angles were not a priority in shunga depictions of men and women and so the twisting of her body would be an unreliable indicator.<sup>176</sup> To connect the image to nature, as was the way with ukiyo-e, the couple are making love outside. The artwork incorporates the everyday images of life by showing the empty bowl in front of her and the crumpled napkin, as well as the folded towel put neatly beside them that will likely be used to clean up once they are done engaging in intercourse. Rich detail is added to fabric of their kimonos to show that this is a scene between two people with some wealth to their name, and we can tell that the woman is likely not a sex worker as her kimono fastens in the back rather than in the front. In the background, we see cherry blossom trees, which not only show the time of the scene, but also emphasize how the moment is fleeting and will be over quickly. These various visual themes were all popular in ukiyo-e imagery, as discussed above.

The majority of shunga focuses on heterosexual intimate encounters, mostly married couples, young lovers, lustful widows, adultery, and male and female sex workers.<sup>177</sup> Many women are

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<sup>175</sup> Sotaru, 231-232.

<sup>176</sup> Tinios, "Art, Anatomy, and Eroticism", 53.

<sup>177</sup> Buckland, 39.

shown as equal sexual partners engaging in consensual and pleasurable sex.<sup>178</sup> We see examples of this being true in works such as Kitagawa Utamaro's book, *Negai no Itoguchi (Unravelling the Threads of Desire)*, from 1799 which had multiple prints that showed women openly expressing their sexuality and their desires during intercourse.<sup>179</sup> However, their pleasure primarily focuses on penetration, due to the belief that this was the only form of intercourse that could satisfy a woman. There were many myths that were used to demonstrate "the sacred power of the sex organs of deities" and the sexual union between men and women.<sup>180</sup>

Dialogue was another heavily important characteristic of shunga. It controlled both the plot and the emotional experiences of the figures in the image.<sup>181</sup> This became particularly important when analyzing scenes of homosexuality, as it helps to show the sex as enjoyable and consensual through the dialogue. The dialogue of the characters is "intimately bound" to them and radiates "their words and feelings from the inside of the picture outward."<sup>182</sup> Illustrators went to great lengths to show the experiences of sexual passion between two people and to depict what they saw in their work. The dialogue was used to express humor as well as the "reality and variety of sexual passion."<sup>183</sup> When we take the words spoken between protagonists into account, we have a much deeper appreciation for the contents in the work.

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<sup>178</sup> Buckland, 39.

<sup>179</sup> Buckland, 118.

<sup>180</sup> Suzuki Kenkō, "Popular Cults of Sex Organs in Japan: Guardian Deities, Auspicious Objects and Votive Paintings," In *Shunga: Sex and Pleasure in Japanese Art*, ed. Timothy Clark, C. Andrew Gerstle, Aki Ishigami, and Akika Yano (The British Museum: London, UK, 2013), 364.

<sup>181</sup> Pollack, 85.

<sup>182</sup> Hayakawa Monta, "Listening to the Voices in *Shunga*," In *Shunga: Sex and Pleasure in Japanese Art*, ed. Timothy Clark, C. Andrew Gerstle, Aki Ishigami, and Akika Yano (The British Museum: London, UK, 2013), 162.

<sup>183</sup> Monta, "Listening to the Voices of *Shunga*," 169.

### C. Censorship Laws in the Tokugawa Period

Critics of shunga attempted to link declining behavior in youthful men, citing the multiple brawls that were known to happen on the streets of the pleasure district.<sup>184</sup> Samurai and townsmen were both expected to lead modest and frugal lifestyles. The popularity of shunga and the erotic parodies of the shogunate made it so that these reforms tightened down on the publishing industry as well.<sup>185</sup> Known as the Kyōhō Reforms, passed in 1721, they banned any kind of work that challenged or “departs from accepted orthodoxy (hitotōri no koto)”, which included not only the ruling government, but also Confucianism, Buddhism, Shintō, or any other sanctioned subjects taught in Edo Japan.<sup>186</sup> This was one of only three occasions where “the production and consumption of erotic pictures and books” was prohibited by the government.<sup>187</sup> An example of one work that went against the Kyōhō reforms was Nishikawa Sukenobu’s book, *Hyakunin Jorō Shina-Sadame (One Hundred Women Classified According to their Rank, 1723)*. This book showed women of all classes and occupations, from courtly women to the lowest ranked sex worker. The book was put on the list of banned works because it had “presented upper-class women alongside prostitutes.”<sup>188</sup>

The Kansei reforms was the second major reforms in the Edo period, extending from 1790 to roughly 1800. It gave even stricter guidelines on the banning of prints, specifically targeting

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<sup>184</sup> Screech, Location 756-770.

<sup>185</sup> Buckland, 80.

<sup>186</sup> Jennifer Preston, “Shunga and Censorship in the Edo Period (1600-1868),” In *Shunga: Sex and Pleasure in Japanese Art*, ed. Timothy Clark, C. Andrew Gerstle, Aki Ishigami, and Akika Yano (The British Museum: London, UK, 2013), 244.

<sup>187</sup> Preston, “Shunga and Censorship,” 246.

<sup>188</sup> Buckland, 32.

satirical literature, which shunga often ended up being categorized as. These restrictions included limiting popular prints, colored books and albums, full-bust portraits, and the naming of any specific sex workers.<sup>189</sup> When Santō Kyōden published a “satirical account of the brothel life”, he ended up handcuffed for fifty days and his publisher, Tsutaya Jūzaburō, had to forfeit his assets.<sup>190</sup>

The Tenpō reforms in 1841 came after a series of bad weather and crop failures which led to famine and riots due to high rice prices. It brought stricter control to society, particularly to the floating world, and abolished certain trades to punish kabuki actors, as well as shunga authors and publishers. Rather than leaving censorship in the publishers’ hands as the Kyōhō reforms had, this time the government conducted official investigations itself, though it only went until 1851.<sup>191</sup> This caused the publications of erotic works to take a complete hiatus for several years, not picking up again until 1848.<sup>192</sup> Erotic works by artists such as Utagawa Kunisada, Utagawa Kuniyoshi, Keisai Eisen, and Shingenobu were burned alongside their blocks so they could not be reprinted.<sup>193</sup>

Shunga and ukiyo-e were both like any other types of writing or art created during the Tokugawa period; they were part of the same field aimed “to present a particular view of the world,” and what they thought that world should be like.<sup>194</sup> It’s because of this influence that the

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<sup>189</sup> Preston, 252.

<sup>190</sup> Preston, 252.

<sup>191</sup> Buckland, 149.

<sup>192</sup> Buckland, 129.

<sup>193</sup> Preston, 253.

<sup>194</sup> Gerstle, 320.

shogunate would believe it necessary to target erotic works for censorship, particularly by implementing laws that targeted political commentary and parody as well as “anything from the mildly amorous to the downright filthy.”<sup>195</sup> Despite how strict the laws were on paper, publishers and artists continued to return to producing works due to the high demand for sexual prints. They simply had to change their approach. Where they had previously inscribed the prints with the name of author, artist, and publisher before the Kyōhō reforms, they changed to hiding their names within their works through puns and dialogue. For example, Kitagawa Utamaro places his name in the text of his work *Ehon Hime Hajime* (1790), when a woman says she wonders “how Utamaro came to know about her affair with her haiku poetry teacher.”<sup>196</sup>

To get around being targeted for commenting on current affairs, they would set their scenes in distant historical periods, and make the characters behave in ways that were “bordering on the ridiculous.”<sup>197</sup> With their underground status, artists and writers of the Tokugawa era used parody and satire at extreme levels to hide the true meaning of their work. As C. Andrew Gerstle puts it in his article, “Shunga and Parody”: “No notable personage is to be taken seriously; no one is anything more than a sexual animal; no one is safe from being made the butt of a jest.”<sup>198</sup> Artists who created these works knew they were doing so at great personal risk, but they still wanted to contribute to the public conversations that were being had by other creators, and paint the shogunate as being increasingly out of touch with reality.<sup>199</sup> Through the use of parody, they

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<sup>195</sup> Preston, 247.

<sup>196</sup> Preston, 250.

<sup>197</sup> Gerstle, 319.

<sup>198</sup> Gerstle, 331.

<sup>199</sup> Preston, 257.

were able to continue to produce erotica throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and engage in ongoing discourse that “went against the grain of accepted Tokugawa public law, morals, and customs.”<sup>200</sup>

#### **IV. Advertisements, Pleasure Districts, & Sex Toys**

In the growing commercialism of Edo Japan, advertising became a much larger purpose for print makers and publishers than it had been in previous centuries. People became as marketable as objects and sex workers made for the easy commodification of sex.<sup>201</sup> When the shogunate decided to confine sex work to government sanctioned pleasure quarters, they did so because they believed that “careful regulation” was the answer to the moral issues of prostitution among the Tokugawa Japanese.<sup>202</sup> Homosexuality in particular became equated to commercial sex and same-sex couples were advertised accommodating spaces at hito-yado/naka/yado, or “love hotels.”<sup>203</sup> The brothels also made sure to place out advertisements for female homosexual sex workers that were targeted directly at women (as opposed to men looking for threesomes.)<sup>204</sup>

Sex toys were highly popular in Tokugawa Japan. Known as warai-bon or warai dōgu (literally translated as “laughter devices”), they included toys such as regular dildos, smaller dildos that could be worn on the finger, erection supporting tubes, ribbed “cages” that could be placed on the penis to create texture, caps to place on the head of the penis that could be used for

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<sup>200</sup> Gerstle, 331.

<sup>201</sup> Leupp, 136.

<sup>202</sup> Leupp, 140.

<sup>203</sup> Leupp, 147.

<sup>204</sup> Leupp, 151-152.



contraception, rings to wear around the penis to stimulate the vagina, balls that could be placed inside the vagina, and many more. They were made of various materials, such as metal, wood, or stone.<sup>205</sup> Western writer Havelock Ellis wrote about the Japanese sex shops in the Edo period, which advertised their sex toys for sale readily, particularly targeting women. He stated that “Japanese women have probably carried the mechanical arts of auto-eroticism to the highest degree of perfection” and that they “frequently use an artificial penis of paper or clay called *engi*.”<sup>206</sup>

Shunga was used to both advertise these products as well as provide instruction for their use. One way they instructed using dildos was to secure it to the waist with a string, turning it into a “strap-on,” and men or women could use it to pleasure their partner.<sup>207</sup> Katsushika Hokusai created an advert for a collection of sex toys in 1821 (fig. 12) which showed multiple sex toys that he illustrated being used throughout his erotic story, *Manpuku Wagōjin (Gods of Myriad Conjugal Delights)*.<sup>208</sup> The sex toy depicted in the bottom right is called *mejima tagaigata*, or the “Isle of women, double header” and was a double-headed dildo that could be used by two women and allow them to face each other while engaging in intercourse. The title referring to the “Isle of women” is a reference to the Isle of Lesbos in Greece, the island where the lesbian poet

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<sup>205</sup> Buckland, 66-67.

<sup>206</sup> Longstreet, 98-99.

<sup>207</sup> Buckland, 66.

<sup>208</sup> Cat. 84, “Contexts for *Shunga*,” In *Shunga: Sex and Pleasure in Japanese Art*, ed. Timothy Clark, C. Andrew Gerstle, Aki Ishigami, and Akika Yano (The British Museum: London, UK, 2013), 312.

Sappho was said to have lived. Sappho's poetry was highly popular in Edo Japan, particularly in the pleasure districts where it was read and studied by geisha and sex workers alike.<sup>209</sup>

These kinds of advertisements marketed their sex toys almost exclusively towards women. Edo women had started to earn some of their own pay outside of the home doing small jobs and with their now "disposable income" they were targeted by many advertisers as the new "main customers" for the erotic market.<sup>210</sup> The modern Japanese lesbian community met and bonded with one another by following advertisements for sensual toys in bookstores; it wouldn't be a stretch to assume that a pre-modern community could do the same in Tokugawa Japan.<sup>211</sup> The existence of *safuisuto* ("sapphists," women who studied Sappho), marketing for these toys, and the popular advertisements for sex workers and lodging that would accommodate female homosexuals is a strong indicator that publishers during the Edo period knew there was a profitable outcome in promoting their products to female homosexuals. This suggests an at least semi-known community must have existed. One that artists would have been willing to cater to if it meant selling more prints.

## Analysis

### I. Depictions of Female Homosexuality by Male Artists

The pleasure districts in Tokugawa Japan offered a variety of encounters for patrons that would satisfy short-term desires, including want for homosexual encounters for both men and women. Similarly, the *shunga* printed at the time made sure to appeal to a variety of audiences.

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<sup>209</sup> Longstreet, 92.

<sup>210</sup> Pollack, 79.

<sup>211</sup> Welker, "Lesbian History," 155.

Christopher Reed points out in his book, *Art and Homosexuality: A History of Ideas*, that many of these prints would have viewed them less in the sense of a “modern ‘gay’ imagery (conceived as an exclusive attraction to one’s own sex) than postmodern ‘queer’ sexuality, with its emphasis on the fluidity of desire and its delight in performances of gender transgressions.”<sup>212</sup> With the cross-dressing kabuki actors and the occasional stories of women dressing as samurai in order to visit female sex workers, this would be a far more accurate way to view the homosexuality in shunga from a modern perspective.

In creating shunga that would appeal to the widest assortment of audiences, male artists created imagery of every manner of intimate encounter that one can think of. Female homosexuality was not the most popular of imagery, but enough prints were produced to gain some attention. These women in these prints nearly always share some sort of sex toy used for penetration and given most prints being authored by men, it is debated whether they were created to be authentic queer desires between women or images that were meant to fulfill male desires to spy on female sexual encounters.<sup>213</sup> Many popular ukiyo-e artists created sexual imagery of women making love to other women, several of which have become highly popular still today.

Likely the most well-known of these is *Women Using a Dildo* (fig. 13) from Chōkōsai Eishō’s book, *Fumi no Kiyogaki* (*Clean Draft of a Love Letter or Pure Drawings of Female Beauty*, 1801). In this image, we see two women lying on bed covers, one wearing a dildo made of horn with a cord tying it around her hips. This type of strap-on was specifically made for women, either to wear at the waist while pleasuring a partner or tied around her ankle to self-

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<sup>212</sup> Reed, “Art and Homosexuality,” 31.

<sup>213</sup> Clark, “What Was *Shunga*?” 21.

pleasure when alone.<sup>214</sup> The woman wearing the toy has a bottle of cream above it and is preparing the dildo to insert into the other woman. She says “Seeing as we’re going to do it like this, I’ll put lots of cream on it. So really make yourself come. Without the cream this big one would not go in.” The other woman responds by saying “Hurry up and put it in.” Many scholars have argued that due to the extreme size of the dildo, that this was not meant to be a print created for women.<sup>215</sup> It is also stated that because the two women are ladies-in-waiting in a samurai home, that they live in “a world without men” and that it would have been seen as “necessary” to engage in sex with other women due to the lack of options.<sup>216</sup> While this isn’t implausible, similar arguments were made about the lesbian community in modern Japan, where it was said that schoolgirls would experiment with same-sex relationships as a passing phase when they were attending sex-segregated schools.<sup>217</sup> It is just as likely that Chōkōsai was attempting to illustrate an authentic same-sex meeting, albeit colored unintentionally by his heterosexual male perspective.

Another image that shows the use of sex toys between women is in the book *Shunshoku Hana no Shizuku (Erotic Drops of Flower Petals*, late-18<sup>th</sup> to mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, fig. 14), by Keisai Eisen (1790-1848). This illustration shows two female servants actively making love to one another on their private room floor. The two are using a double-ended dildo (known as a taigaigata) to pleasure one another. One woman buries her face into the other woman’s shoulder,

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<sup>214</sup> Cat. 83, “Contexts for *Shunga*,” In *Shunga: Sex and Pleasure in Japanese Art*, ed. Timothy Clark, C. Andrew Gerstle, Aki Ishigami, and Akika Yano (The British Museum: London, UK, 2013), 311.

<sup>215</sup> Reed, 31.

<sup>216</sup> Cat. 83, “Contexts for *Shunga*,” 311.

<sup>217</sup> Welker, “Girls’ Love,” 842.

and both cling to one another, their legs wrapped around one another, and their toes curling to show they are filled with passion and pleasure. The two women are still wearing their kimonos, implying that they were filled with a sudden urge to make love to one another, making this a fleeting moment that is like their heterosexual counterparts in shunga at the time. The taigaigata is certainly larger, but so is the illustration detail on their genitals, implying that it may be larger due to the practice of making the genitals the central focus of the image. As the two women are using a sex toy that is primarily marketed towards female homosexuals, it is more likely that this print was made with the awareness that it would be viewed and consumed by women as well.

Katsushika Hokusai's shunga of same-sex desires were not as blatantly impacted by his heterosexual male status. He has several images of women engaging in sexual experiences with one another, including an illustration for the book *Manpuku Wagōjin* (fig. 15), the same book he began with the sex toy advertisement discussed above. In this image, we see two women making love, holding each other close with no apparent sex toy in sight. The book binding creates a natural separation for the woman who eavesdrops on the two others, touching herself to the sound of the lovers in the other room. Without the use of a phallic toy, Hokusai avoids the usual male-led desire for penetration in female homosexual prints. Rather than peeking in through windows or spying around the edge of a privacy screen, the eavesdropper is well hidden behind the screen, and by separating her with the book binding, it makes her seem less intrusive in her actions, allowing for a romantic moment to be formed between the two women making love. These all give the image a far softer feeling, with less of an apparent impact to satisfy male desires. While one could argue that the woman listening in is meant to be a stand in for a male viewer, it seems far more likely that this was an image that would have easily been consumed by women who could put themselves in her place instead.

The illustration of a female diver in *Kinoe no Komatsu (Pine Seedling on the First Rat Day, 1814, fig. 16)* is one of Hokusai's more famous and fascinating erotic images of women that has been reproduced repeatedly throughout the centuries.<sup>218</sup> In this image, we see a naked woman, likely a diver (*ama*), who has been pulled down to the seaweed covered rocks by a large octopus. The creature has all eight tentacles wrapped around her body, playing with her breasts, thighs and arms as its mouth latches on to her clitoris. A smaller octopus is at her head, a tentacle inserted into her mouth as it too plays with her breasts, wrapping another tentacle around her left nipple. The woman, rather than fighting or seeming afraid, has gone into a state of extreme pleasure, characterized by her moans of pleasure in the dialogue in the background. One section reads:

Ee, moo, I'm becoming ticklish One after another until I lose track, fu, fu, fu, fuu, fuu, limits and boundaries are gone. Oo, oo, oo, I've come, anna, aaaaaa, there, there, here, here, uu, mu, mu, mu, fun, mufu, umu, uuuu. Good... good!<sup>219</sup>

The woman's eyes are open, her back is arched, and the octopus is depicted in a way that is almost human-like with its embrace. This image was clearly not meant to be violating as some readings have tried to say since. Rather, the woman is greatly enjoying herself. *Ama* were nearly always women due to their ability to withstand colder temperatures and hold their breath for longer times than men.<sup>220</sup> They are often depicted in sexual situations, showing them in half-naked to fully naked states during regular working activities.<sup>221</sup> Hokusai went even further in his visual play by engaging the woman with an octopus, as the word *tako* (octopus) was slang for

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<sup>218</sup> Buckland, 134.

<sup>219</sup> Buckland, 134.

<sup>220</sup> Buckland, 134.

<sup>221</sup> Buckland, 34.

vagina during the Edo period, due to its “ability to suck firmly,” a term which is used in the dialogue of this image.<sup>222</sup> Viewers at the time would have been aware of this wordplay, particularly women who were interested in other women. This allows the image to be read as an allegory for female homosexual desire, altered to be less explicit as queer erotica to avoid the censorship laws that were in place at the time.

While images of female homosexuality in shunga are rare, this is only a small sample of the works that famous male artists have created. Other famous ukiyo-e masters such as Utamaro, Utagawa Kunisada, Tsukioka Settei, and more created images of pre-modern lesbian desires. With these images circulating, publishers and booksellers being aware of a market for female consumers, and advertisements pushing the same sex-toys used in these shunga prints above to women, it is highly likely that male created prints of female homosexuality were also actively consumed by women seeking out fantasies about other women.

## **II. Works by Katsushika Ōi**

As one of the only female painters to be successful during the Edo and Meiji periods in Japan, knowing Ōi’s personal life is important to understanding her works. Born Katsushika Ei (1800-c.1866), the third daughter of Katsushika Hokusai wrote her name as Eijo in letters and paintings, adding on the character for woman to denote her sex.<sup>223</sup> Many writings about her denote her name as “Oei” to honor her birthname. Ōi, however, means “Hey!” and was often the phrase her father used to call for her, usually resulting in something along the lines of “Hey you!” As a nod to what she ultimately considered a nickname, she ultimately chose Ōi as her

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<sup>222</sup> Buckland, 134.

<sup>223</sup> Davis, 146.

artist's name. In the only image of the only visual depictions of Ōi, we can see this interaction play out for ourselves. Tsuyuki Kōshō's print, *Hokusai and Eijo in Their Lodgings* (fig. 17), shows the two sitting in their home as they paint. Hokusai is bent over his work, close to the ground and the dialogue above the scene paints the amusing story: "Ōi, Ōi!" shouted Hokusai, "Hey, Hey you!" "Hey, hey," his daughter, Eijo, replied, and with a cheeky grin, sand out like a street-caller, "Old man, how 'bout it?" (ōi, ōi, oyaji dono). This sassy exchange between father and daughter showcased the deep connection that the two of them shared. She wrote her painter's name with characters that meant "loyal to Iitsu," the name Hokusai used after her turned sixty which means "one again."<sup>224</sup>

Few women were able to become well known for their brush work during the Tokugawa era due to the social and cultural constraints that were placed on them. However, Ōi was approached for commissions by well-to-do patrons, meaning that she was a well-respected painter, taken seriously as more than just the daughter of Hokusai.<sup>225</sup> Julie Nelson Davis writes about the respect shown to her in her book, *Picturing the Floating World: Ukiyo-e in Context*:

Hokusai also reportedly commented on another occasion that "when it comes to paintings of beautiful women, I can't compete with her—she's quite talented and expert in the technical aspects of painting." Eisen described her as "skilled at drawing, and following after her father has become a professional artist (eshi) while acquiring a reputation as a talented painter." Her knowledge of painting was so complete that she wrote a letter to a distant pupil explaining how to prepare the color red, illustrating the letter with fingers showing how to break the raw material down before beginning the process. She may have also contributed to Hokusai's book on painting techniques.<sup>226</sup>

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<sup>224</sup> Davis, 146.

<sup>225</sup> Davis, 147.

<sup>226</sup> Davis, 147-148.



On top of the praise from her father and colleagues, Ōi was also referred to as “one of the most famous artists in Edo.”<sup>227</sup> Primarily she was known for her published women’s guides, something that was rather ironic considering she was well-known for having a more “masculine presence” and resembling her father in both looks and attitude.<sup>228</sup> Ōi rejected all typical standards for Tokugawa Japan’s expectations of femininity. She drank and smoked, refused to clean, didn’t cook, and rejected the idea of wearing make-up.<sup>229</sup> She didn’t know how to sew or cook, and she and her father lived on take-out meals rather than learning how to make food for themselves. While Ōi married Tsutsumi Tōmei, one of her father’s students, in 1824, they were divorced three years later, supposedly after she had made too critical a comment on his painting skills.<sup>230</sup> Ōi was described as having a “domineering nature” and was said to have been depressive and gloomy, drinking to cope with her moods.<sup>231</sup> Yet despite her tendency towards darkness, her work still uses vibrant and expressive colors. Her strong pigments are so strong and beautiful that young artists in Japan still use the recipes for her colors to this day.<sup>232</sup>

Ōi spent most of her time painting and working in her father’s printshop, North Star Studios, where she was both a manager and a printmaker. Her father suffered a stroke in 1827, and after her mother died in 1828, Ōi became her father’s primary caretaker, living with him until his death at the age of 90. While Hokusai’s stroke left him incapable of making prints until

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<sup>227</sup> Japan Foundation, Toronto, “Katsushika Oei: A Woman Artist in a Floating World,” YouTube, 1:27:22, December 18, 2020, at 12:41.

<sup>228</sup> Japan Foundation, “Katsushika Oei,” at 10:42.

<sup>229</sup> Reed, 34.

<sup>230</sup> Davis, 146.

<sup>231</sup> Japan Foundation, “Katsushika Oei,” at 11:10.

<sup>232</sup> Japan Foundation at 8:13.

1830, Ōi created artwork under her father's name.<sup>233</sup> There are only a few paintings and prints that have been definitively signed by Katsushika Ōi, but all are done in such a rich, distinct style that she learned from her father, that historians have been able to determine a handful of works that can be credited to her without a signature.<sup>234</sup> Some works that are still credited specifically to her father have also been reexamined and art starting to be seen as either collaborative outfits or Ōi's own work simply stamped with Hokusai's seal.<sup>235</sup>

One of the paintings that is confirmed to be a work of Ōi is the hanging scroll, *Girl Composing a Poem Under the Cherry Blossoms in the Night* (c. 1850, fig. 18). This image shows the red that Ōi was writing instructions for to her distant pupil. The young woman, most likely a sex worker, is wearing a bright red kimono under a cherry blossom tree in the middle of the night, the stars glittering above her. The moon and a flickering lantern light up the area around her and give her face a bright, pale complexion. She is writing on a piece of paper in her hands, her face concentrating on her work, lost in her own creativity. Ōi's dedication to detail are evident in this painting, each individual fold of the fabric showing her skill with modeling cloth through deep shading and bright highlights.<sup>236</sup> Ōi seems to paint women almost exclusively, with male figures only showing up to emphasize a scene with beautiful women. Another famous painting of hers, *Three Women Playing Beautiful Instruments* (Bunsei-Tenpō eras, fig. 19), depicts three women playing traditional Japanese instruments. The two facing us are playing the shamisen, an instrument that was customarily played by geishas and other entertainers. The

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<sup>233</sup> Japan Foundation at 14:50.

<sup>234</sup> Japan Foundation at 23:30.

<sup>235</sup> Japan Foundation at 35:52.

<sup>236</sup> Japan Foundation at 34:53.

woman with her back to us plays the koto, a stringed instrument that usually was only played by blind men and women were previously banned from professionally playing.<sup>237</sup> The colors of the painting are wonderfully rich and have the signature molding style that Ōi was known for, just like her image of the sex worker under the cherry blossoms.

Much of her work comes with a stark realism to it. While the natural interactions in *Three Women Playing Beautiful Instruments* makes this reality soft and pleasing to the eye, many of her works portray the images of everyday life into a much darker vein. In another painting known to be by Ōi, *Yoshiwara Kōshisakinozu (Yoshiwara Lattice, Bunsei era, fig. 20)*, she takes the romanticized imagery of the Yoshiwara and puts the dark twist of reality of the lives of women in the Edo period into focus.<sup>238</sup> The women are shown behind the lattice bars, the only light source the lanterns inside of the brothel. This puts the sex worker who leans forward to talk to a customer in silhouette, the faces of the figures incapable of being seen in the shadows. The Yoshiwara is portrayed in literal darkness as the women are forced to sell their bodies to pay off their debts.

Ōi and Hokusai collaborated on several works. Rosina Buckland states that she likely assisted him with the paintings that he created on old Dutch paper.<sup>239</sup> These works allow us to see how easily their two styles melded together and why it can become difficult to authenticate which works were her own rather than later period prints by her father. In many of these paintings, we see the signature of her shading with the soft molding of the female figures and the

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<sup>237</sup> Japan Foundation at 11:50.

<sup>238</sup> Japan Foundation at 16:00

<sup>239</sup> Japan Foundation at 35: 52

sharp creases of cloth.<sup>240</sup> In one painting from this group, *Boys' Festival, Fifth Day of Fifth Month* (1824-1826, fig. 21), we can see these exact signatures at play. The kimonos that the women are wearing hang on their bodies with several natural creases shaded into the fabric. Even the green cloth covering the baby is rendered with the same detail. The woman sitting on the floor has her blue kimono hanging open and the light shading of the breast emphasizes the natural fullness of a woman trying to breastfeed her child. The women are beautifully executed, just as Hokusai said of his daughter's skills, and it is easy to see her touch in the composition.

Much of Ōi's work has run the risk of being credited to male artists, especially her father considering how many prints she produced under his seal. One of these works is the shunga piece *Awabe Divers* (1820s, fig. 22), often attributed to Hokusai due to the style of the faces and the way the bodies are positioned. These details were also ones that Ōi used in her own works, given that she was able to mimic her father's style perfectly. With no signature, it is impossible to say for certain, but the recipes for the colors, particularly the red, match those that are used in Ōi's work, making it more likely to be done by her hand than her father's.<sup>241</sup> In this image, two female divers are making love on the sand. One lies on her back while the other is bent over her, her face down by her lover's feet and her genitals up near her head. The woman on top pleasures her partner with a taigaigata while the other woman touches her lover's genitals with her fingers. The classic red skirts of the ama (done with the same color red we see in Ōi's *Girl Composing* and *Three Women*) are pushed up around their waists to show their line of work to the viewer. Awabi divers were primarily in all-female setting and were often eroticized for male viewers. Given her father's multiple pieces on the awabi divers, including the diver with the octopi

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<sup>240</sup> Japan Foundation at 36:20.

<sup>241</sup> Reed, 33.

discussed above, Ōi would have known very well about the nature of awabi divers' work as well as the iconography used in the shunga made of them. She would have knowingly been able to utilize this visual dialogue to create an authentic love scene between two ama.

### **III. Impacts of the Male Gaze**

The way that men sexually objectified women in Tokugawa Japan certainly had an impact on the way that they represented them in art. As previously shown in the prints of sex workers, male artists often glorified and romanticized the idea of lustful women, making them seem wanton at heart, and leaving the male viewer with a rich imagination capable of inserting himself in the scene as either a participant or an on-looker. Eisen portrayed female sexuality as purely focused on penetrative sex, as did most men and women of the Edo period. He often phrased it in terms of weaponry, such as long lances tipped with tampons. These pictures consistently view female homosexuality with a "phallic lens," dildos often illustrated that are as thick as a man's arm.<sup>242</sup>

However much of the imagery we attribute to the male gaze can also be seen as a product of the way shunga was produced at the time, both through classic visuals taken from ukiyo-e practices, and by the strict expectations of censors that the publishers were trying to please. When analyzing the impact of the male gaze, we must remember that how an image is viewed depends on the audience looking at it.<sup>243</sup> Therefore it is necessary that we ask the question: how might the female viewers of Edo Japan have interpreted the same imagery that modern historians see as being solely for the male viewer?

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<sup>242</sup> Saslow, 145.

<sup>243</sup> Chalmers, 153.

As stated earlier, the enlargement of sexual toys could easily be in line with making genitals the “principal figure” of the image, as was customary in shunga due to its adherence to ukiyo-e traditions.<sup>244</sup> Even the dialogue written in Chōkōsai’s *Women Using a Dildo* piece (“Without the cream this big one would not go in...”) does not discredit this theory as many heterosexual prints show women claiming that their partner’s biological penis is large and filling, such as in Utamaro’s *Negai no Itogochi*, where the cheating wife bemoans her husband’s small genitals that are not nearly as satisfying as her current lover’s.<sup>245</sup> As previously discussed, censorship laws expected that all visual media would adhere to theories that were sanctioned by the Tokugawa regime.<sup>246</sup> This included Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism, both of which heavily emphasized the need for heterosexual relationships and male-female sexual pleasure.<sup>247</sup> With this in mind, when publishers allowed artists to stray from the usual portrayal of heterosexual lovers, all images ended up adhering to the heterosexist idea of penetration being the only legitimate form of sex. We see this in images of men as well as women, with the younger washaku being penetrated by the older male to uphold cultural norms of male homosexuality.<sup>248</sup> It is just as likely that prints of female homosexuality required creative workarounds so that they still adhered to these censorship laws, making it so that artists had to include penetrative sex toys so that they kept the link to heterosexual sex.

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<sup>244</sup> Pollack, 83.

<sup>245</sup> Monta, “Listening to the Voices of *Shunga*,” 168.

<sup>246</sup> Preston, 244.

<sup>247</sup> Wieringa, 28.

<sup>248</sup> Phlugfelder, 964.

Looking at Ōi's works, she often took traditional Japanese imagery and altered it to contain a deeper nod to reality.<sup>249</sup> The darkness in *Girl Composing a Poem Under the Cherry Blossoms in the Night* covers most of the cherry blossoms in shadow, an image usually given focus to emphasize their fleeting beauty. We can see the stark contrast to the similar work made by male artist Suzuki Harunobu, *Girl Viewing Plum Blossoms at Night*. Both prints show nearly an identical subject, however Ōi embraces the darkness of the night to create strong contrasts between highlight and shadow, and to emphasize the way that the sex worker's life is shrouded in darkness even at the most simplistic of moments. Harunobu's piece in contrast seems far more lighthearted, with whimsical, light coloring and a young girl who, while clearly also a sex worker, is childlike in comparison to the grown woman of Ōi's painting. In *Three Women Playing Beautiful Instruments*, the central figure has her back towards us, which is hardly ever done in ukiyo-e or Japanese painting compositions. It creates an intimacy to the group of women, a realistic bonding that would have otherwise been ignored.

In *Yoshiwara Kōshisakinozu*, the reality of the lives of sex workers is much more prominent than what other artists portrayed at the time.<sup>250</sup> Men primarily painted the sex workers of the Yoshiwara as beautiful, lust-driven women who took on lovers and enjoyed mutually pleasure. Ōi's work acknowledges that most of these "courtesans" were impoverished, rural girls who have been turned into sex slaves.<sup>251</sup> This essay discussed a similar scene by a male painter earlier, Utamaro's 1840 print, *Seiro Ehon Nenju-Gyoji*. While he shows the sex workers behind the lattice in a way that also emphasizes their being caged, we simply see them interacting with

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<sup>249</sup> Japan Foundation at 35:53.

<sup>250</sup> Japan Foundation at 16:00

<sup>251</sup> Japan Foundation at 16:40.

one another, gossiping, and behaving like any other women portrayed in other ukiyo-e of the time-period.<sup>252</sup> In contrast, the workers in *Yoshiwara Kōshisakinozu* lean against the bars of their prison, trying to entice customers, shrouded in darkness as they partake in the sanctioned sex trade of Edo Japan.<sup>253</sup> These subtle changes that Ōi brings to her work show the less obvious impacts of the male gaze on even the non-eroticized prints of women in the Tokugawa era.

A similar approach can be taken to the only erotic print that can possibly be credited to Ōi's hand, the *Awabi Divers*. Reed puts it well when discussing the print in his book, *Art and*

*Homosexuality: A History of Ideas*:

It seems significant that one of the most interesting depictions of a taigaigata in action is also one of the few ukiyo-e that may be an exception to the rule of male authorship. Scholars debate whether this image of two [awabi] divers making love on a beach was designed by Hokusai's daughter, Katsushika Oei (active 1818-54), or authored by a man imitating her distinctive style. In either case, the image's association with female authorship deepens ambiguity, of its meanings.<sup>254</sup>

What is different about Ōi's approach to this sex scene compared to her male counterparts?

Looking at it in contrast the other work involving a taigaigata, Eisen's love scene between two women in *Shunshoku Hana no Shizuku*, we can see a few obvious distinctions. In Ōi's work, both faces of the women can be seen, and the emphasis is brought to their position rather than to the sex toy penetrating them. In Eisen's work, both women are inserting the toy into themselves, making love in the way that is usually described in the advertisements for the taigaigata. In Ōi's work, we see a more creative use, with the one woman bent over her lover penetrating her with

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<sup>252</sup> Japan Foundation at 27:45.

<sup>253</sup> Japan Foundation at 35:33.

<sup>254</sup> Reed, 33.



the double-ended dildo so she can use it more deeply than a traditional dildo, while her partner stimulates her with her fingers. We barely see the woman who is on top being penetrated at all, subverting the usual role assigned to female participants in shunga. The role of penetrator and penetrated in shunga is usually clearer cut, such as in the Chōkōsai shunga work. In *Awabi Divers*, neither party wears a sex toy to be the primary penetrator, and the taigaigata is not used in a manner that makes them both the penetrated. By using their hands to stimulate one another, whether directly or through holding the sex toy, the two women are put onto an equal playing field without being subjected to the usual heterosexist roles. This makes *Awabi Divers* a rare piece that subverts that usual dynamic instigated by the male gaze.

While it is impossible to use modern lesbian identity markers for pre-modern women, there are aspects of Ōi's life that have brought her sexuality into question. Her frequent visits to the Yoshiwara district can be accredited to her art, but she spent most of her time there in the company of these sex-workers. Her adoption of masculine behavior and her desire to educate other women both step outside of the socially accepted gender roles assigned to Tokugawa women, a characteristic that is often seen in women who are attracted to the same sex.<sup>255</sup> Though we can't assign a sexuality to Ōi posthumously, especially with such circumstantial evidence, the possibility of her having been attracted to women would also alter how *Awabi Divers* could be

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<sup>255</sup> Reed, 34.

viewed. When women who are attracted to other women view or create works that are normally impacted by the male gaze, a paradoxical shift can occur, where “the assumed power of the male gaze is dislocated or rather played back on itself, and a space is opened up to include the potential for a *lesbian gaze*.”<sup>256</sup> This idea, discussed more in detail by Chalmers in her book, *Emerging Lesbian Voices from Japan*, alters not only the way that we can imagine female homosexuals in Edo Japan would have viewed Ōi’s divers, but also how they may have approached similar work by male artists. When making room for the idea of a potential lesbian gaze, we expand the possibility of women searching for, consuming, and even enjoying the prints available to them of female homosexual erotica.

### **Conclusions**

Women in Tokugawa Japan had little say in the expectations of their own lives. Everything from the way that they dressed, to the people they could interact with, to the ways they could express their sexuality was heavily monitored, decided by discourse that they had no means to participate in. Men used their bodies for their own sexual gratification, both in reality and fantasy, and women were simply expected to follow the societal norms. Sold into slavery at young ages or married off to men to expand their clan’s power, much like women in the rest of the world, they were prisoners of a patriarchal society. This silencing of women and pressure to marry and have children has persisted throughout the centuries, impacting even the modern women in Japan to this day.

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<sup>256</sup> Chalmers, 67 (emphasis mine).

But women were not passive in their oppression. Just like today, the women of Edo Japan carved out their own communities, created their own music and poetry, formed relationships, and loved one another. These relationships are documented in fictional stories, poetry, and in many prints of the floating world, ukiyo-e. Most of these prints were created by men and so they must be viewed with a caution that all art is approached with. By lining up this male-created imagery with excerpts from letters, diaries, and stories written by and for women, historians can parse out the fact from fiction and get a better idea for how the women of the Tokugawa era truly lived. While female sexuality was strictly forbidden to be discussed in detail, many shunga artists ignored this rule and showed women in lustful, physically fulfilling relationships. Even though most of these relationships are shown as heterosexual, there have been enough shunga that has survived of female homosexual encounters to safely assume that this was also a common practice. Written and visual documentation confirm that women were known to cross-dress and meet with other women in the Yoshiwara district, that the pleasure quarters had love hotels with rooms set aside for male and female homosexual occupants, and many sex toys were advertised towards women for engaging in sex with other women.

By reading about the cultural expectations and experiences of women in Tokugawa Japan, it is easy to see how even those pieces heavily impacted by the male gaze were still likely consumed and enjoyed by female patrons. Many of the recorded customers for erotic books were women, as they had begun to work small jobs that provided them with newly disposable income in a rapidly growing capitalist society. With a well-known and large female market, it is safe to say that publishers and artists alike knew that women were part of their audience and would have attempted to include them when making works for a widely varied audience.

How can we tell the difference between the imagery that was meant for female homosexual viewership and the imagery that was created by and for male fantasies? In short, there is no way to be sure, but there are key components that we see in the works created by male artists versus the works created by Katsushika Ōi. While men tended to treat women as objects, often showing them as wanton and desperate for penetration, Ōi shows women engaging in mutual relationships, where pleasure is put onto an equal playing field. Her work, *Awabi Divers*, portrays an intimacy that many of the pieces by her male counter-parts lack, save for her father, Hokusai. Given that Ōi collaborated with her father on many pieces and even produced works in his name, it is hard to tell where her hand may have played a part in Hokusai's portrayal of women, which shows how maintaining relationships with women could lessen the influence of the male gaze on works of art.

## Illustrations



Figure 1. Suzuki Harunobu (1725-1770). *Girl Viewing Plum Blossoms at Night*. Woodcut, 32.4 x 21 cm. Edo Period. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Fletch Fund, 1929 (JP 1506)





Figure 2: Kitigawa Utamaro (1753-1806). *Mother Breast-Feeding Her Child* from the series *Meisho Fukei, Bijin Juni So*. Woodblock, 25.4 x 37.3 cm. Edo Period. Library of Congress, Washington D.C. Ukiyo-e shuka 3 (1978), no. 368.2.

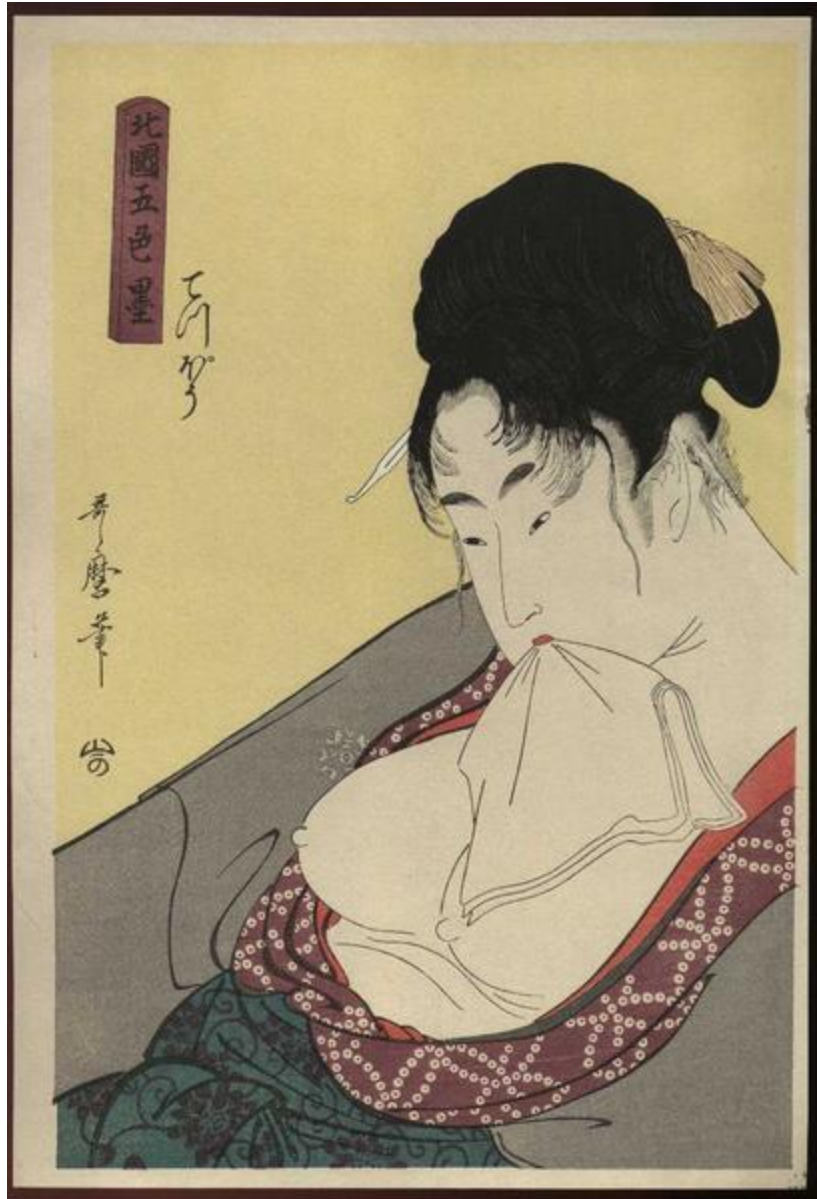


Figure 3: Kitagawa Utamaruo (1753-1806). *Teppo*. 1790s. Woodblock print, 37.5 x 25.1 cm. Private collection.





Figure 4: Totoya Hokkei (1780-1850). *Eguchi*, from the series *Nô Plays for the Hanazono Club* (*Hanazono yôkyoku bantsuzuki*), c. 1820, Woodblock print, 20.7 x 18.2 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (1911). 11.20611.



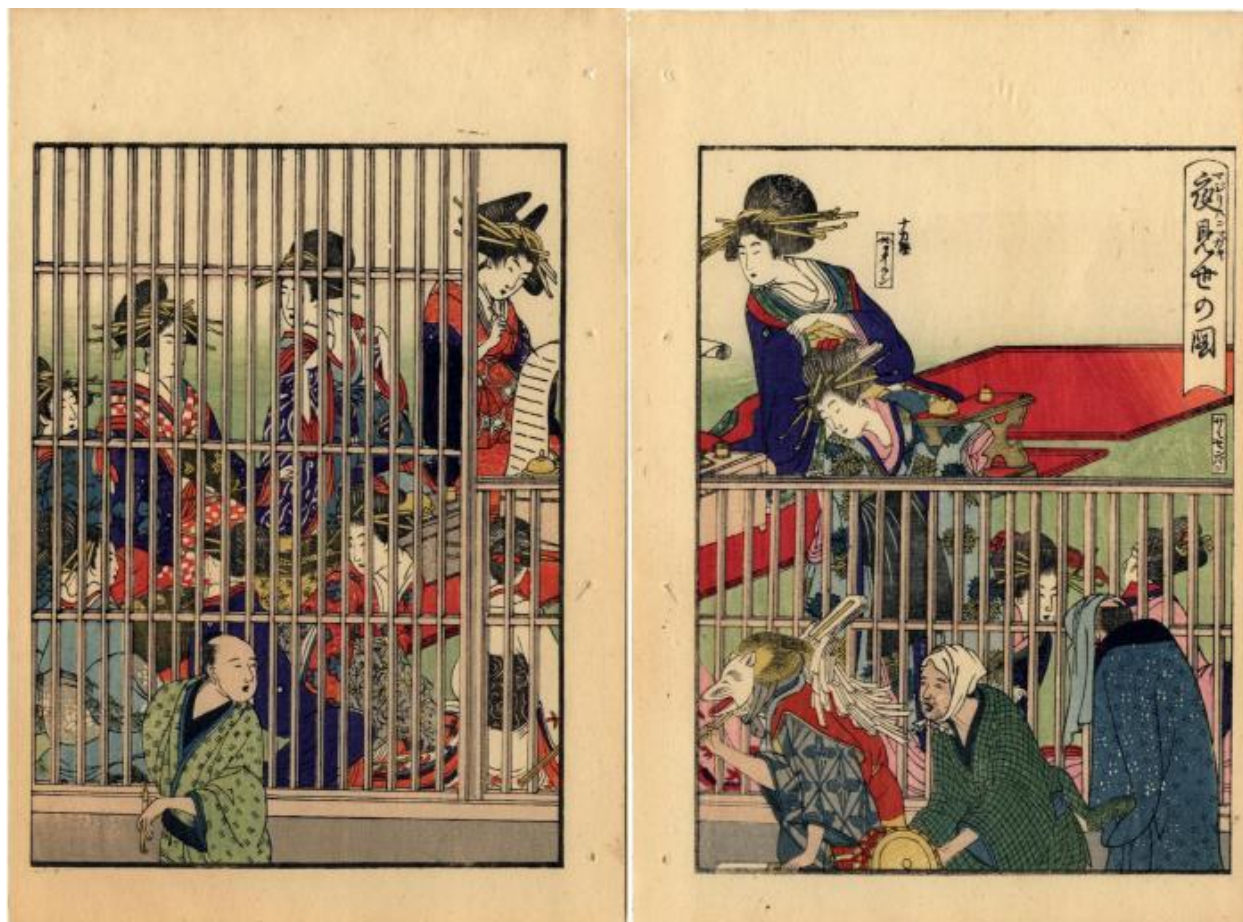


Figure 6: Kitagawa Utamaro (1753-1806). *Courtesans on display* from *Annals of the Green Houses* (*Seiro Ehon Nenju-Gyoji*). 1804. Woodblock print. 30.8 x 23.18 cm. British Museum, London (1979). 1979,0305,0.159.1



Figure 6: Utagawa Kunisada (1786-1865). *Ryōnen Gensō*, from *Kokon meifuden*, 19<sup>th</sup> century. Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago. Cat. 222993.





Figure 7: Hishikawa Moronobu (1615-1694). *Lovers Beside Flowering Autumn Grasses*. c. 1680s. Woodblock print, 23.5 x 33.7 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1949. JP 3069.





Figure 8: Ando Hiroshige (1797-1858). *Mie River at Yokkaichi*. 1834. Woodblock print, 22.5 x 34.9 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Rogers Fund, 1936. JP2484.



Figure 9: Suzuki Harunobo (1725-1770). *Woman Riding a Flying Crane* (1765). Woodblock print, 20.8 x 27.8 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Denman Ross Collection. 06.482.





Figure 10: Utagawa Kunisada (1786-1864). *Enchi Gojū Yojō* (*Amorous Murasaki Finds Pleasure in Fifty-Some Chapters*), c. 1835. Woodblock print. 25.7 cm x 18.1 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. *Asia, Prints and Drawings* (2007). 2007.63.1-3.



Figure 11: Style of Suzuki Harunobu. *Woman Dreaming of an Erotic Scene*. c. 1770. Woodblock print. 18.7 x 25 cm. British Museum, London. Asia (1974). OA+,0.83.





Figure 12: Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849). Illustration for *Manpuku Wagōjin (Gods of Myriad Conjugal Delights)*. 1821. Woodblock print, 22.5 cm x 15.7 cm. International Research Center for Japanese Studies, Kyoto. 003063468 (KC/172/Ka).





Figure 13: Chōkōsai Eishō. *Women Using a Dildo* from *Fumi no Kiyogaki* (*Clean Draft of a Love Letter or Pure Drawings of Female Beauty*). 1801. Woodblock print, 25 x 35.9 cm. Victoria & Albert Museum, London. Marmaduke Langdale Horn (1954). E166-1954.



Figure 14: Keisai Eisen (1790-1848). Illustration from *Shunshoku Hana no Shizuku (Erotic Drops of Flower Petals)*. Late 18<sup>th</sup>-mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. Woodblock print, 23 x 15.6 cm. National Museum of Asian Art, Washington D.C. Gerhard Pulverer Collection (2007). FSC-GR-780.5.1-4.





Figure 15: Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849). Illustration for *Manpuku Wagōjin* (*Gods of Myriad Conjugal Delights*). 1821. Woodblock print, 22.5 cm x 15.7 cm. International Research Center for Japanese Studies, Kyoto. 003063468 (KC/172/Ka).



Figure 16: Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849). Illustration in *Kino no Komatsu (Young Pine Saplings)*. 1814. Woodblock print, 22 x 15.5cm. National Museum of Asian Art, Washington D.C. Gerhard Pulverer Collection (2007). FSC-GR-780.4.1-3.





Figure 17: Tsuyuki Kōshō (d. c. 1893). *Hokusai and Eijo in Their Lodgings*. Ink on paper. Before 1893. National Diet Library, Tokyo.



Figure 18: Katsushika Ōi (1800-c. 1866). *Girl Composing a Poem Under the Cherry Blossoms in the Night*. c. 1850. Color on silk, hanging scroll, 88.8 x 34.5 cm. Menard Art Museum, Aichi.





Figure 19: Katsushika Ōi (1800-c. 1866). *Three Women Playing Musical Instruments*. Edo period, Bunsei-Tenpō eras. Ink and color on silk, hanging scroll, 46.5 x 67.5 cm (overall: 132 x 90 cm). Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, William Sturgis Bigelow Collection. 11.7689.



Figure 20: Katsushika Ōi, *Yoshiawa Kōshisakinozu (Yoshiwara Lattice)*. Edo period, Bunsei era. Color on paper, 26.3 x 39.8 cm. Ōta Memorial Museum, Tokyo.





Figure 21: Katsushika Hokusai with assistance from Katsushika Ōi. *Boys' Festival, Fifth Day of Fifth Month*. 1824-1826. Color on old Dutch paper. National Museum of Ethnology, Leiden.



Figure 22: Attributed to Katsushika Ōi. *Awabi Divers*. 1820s. Woodblock print, 26 x 37.5 cm. Lyon Collection, New York.



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