

Desire and Representation in Japanese *Shunga*

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Essential to the development of what today we call *shunga* or *makura-e* are the different processes of commodification and singularity that they have undergone from the Edo period (1603–1868) through the present. Even more than their unique identity, we should be attentive to their constant mutation (and, therefore, the multiplicity of senses which follows upon that), which was dependent on their “biographies,” including changes in their status, in their channels of circulation and consumption, and in the categories into which they were classified by the authorities, besides many other factors. In spite of the time they were produced, the Edo period, several of the complex faces of these images originated in estimates and recent discourses which try to present as being generally sectors of partial sceneries of the *shunga* history, which has also contributed to the generation of strong polemics.

It is clear that many of these discourses result from practices that we call “appropriation modalities,” following Roger Chartier, who also explains:

The works, really, don’t have a steady, universal or fixed meaning. They are invested with plural and variable meanings, built at the moment there is a new meeting between a proposition and a reception, between the forms and the reasons which give them their structure, and the competences and expectations of the publics who appropriate them. In the instance of *shunga*, this production of meanings, and, mainly, usages, is also marked by the supposed part taken by these images that would be sexual stimulants.

As part of the mythology of *shunga*, the stories, anecdotes and discussions about its possible functions and uses occupy a detached place in practically each of the recent texts dedicated to its study. Besides its being declared that one of the oldest applications of *shunga* was educative, and that it had its origin on the continent with the Chinese *fangzhong-shu*, other legendary uses are also frequently mentioned: for protection of warriors (hidden in the armor), for protection against fire, tremors and disasters, and for attracting good fortune, etc. These “miraculous” properties that the ancient sources—and others not so distant in time—attribute to *shunga* have something in common: every one has remote ties with the situations generally represented in these images, centered on sex.

Independently of the absolutist and restrictive tendencies regarding to the *shunga* uses, if we re-examine some sources of the Edo period, we will notice that the situations are more varied than it is intended to present them in certain occasions:

... Otherwise, there are images of sex between men and women that are called *shunga* and *warai-e*, among other names. There are many types of printed books: every year new titles with very lively colors are ordered, even with gilt and silver prints. It is said they are in the entrance to the shops. Besides, these

images exhibition seems not to irritate the parents and brothers, who see them as an entertainment. Women and girls who collect them say they are amulets that will bring them more clothes, and keep them in the furniture and garment chests, and, inclusively, there are mothers who passes such images by heritance to their daughters (Extract from the book *Seiji kenbun-roku*, by Buyō Inshi, 1816).

. . . The contents of this chest belongs to the mistress of our daimio. There are hand tools made to order, and erotic books supplies. Even if it is registered her name on these sexual utensils. . . . (Extract from the kabuki theater booklet *Kanadehon Chūshingura*, by Takeda Izumo, Miyoshi Shōraku and Namiki Senryū, 1748).

It is certain it would be completely irrational to try to divest the *shunga* of its evident sexual implications. The evidences are very incisive (from the written references and its very manifestation) for not taking into account the *shunga* decisive role as a sexual stimulant. However, in spite of having contrary opinions to these legendary uses, asserting that it is very probable that some of them have appeared as lyric recreations, or that they have tangential justifications, alienated from its consume (which, maybe, with the passage of time and the repetition, would have firmed, fixed and originated real uses), and that consider that certainly such ones were not the most divulged functions, I consider that they are important factors to take into account, for it is impossible to restrict the complexity of the uses that an object or image can have only to those the creators had intended, or we consider more pertinent, or which seem more evident to us.

Standing back from the originated polemics related to the *shunga* functions, with which I agree only partly, and making allowance for the impossibility of generalizing these uses *a posteriori* (or even *a priori*), we can affirm that some of them were more extensive than the others. From this angle, and leaving from this section topic “Expressões do Erotismo Japonês” (Expressions of the Japanese Eroticism), it would interest us here to analyze the relations between the sexual representation and gratification. This stimulation could be accomplished by two basic fields that would depend on the consumer needs and desires: by the planes of the fantasy and the physical act (in the form of auto-eroticism or a combination between a couple or group). From these two, I consider that the most dynamical, interesting, and, possibly, most developed field is the mental recreations one. In this plane, as Elizabeth Cowie shows, the image builds a fantasies scenery where certain desires are represented, sublimed in the spectator mind. Thus, I believe that only from this imaginary remodeling of the levels that ennoble its operation on spectator, it is possible to originate some physiological answer or simply stay in the mental manipulation of a fantasy. Although I share with the argument for the necessity of pondering on this production as a sexual stimulant, it seems to me that we should not be exclusive to its uses.

It means that, reducing the utilities (and answers) that the *shunga* could and can originate from the intellectuals, being for them symbolic or physical, not only a principle that nobody can predict becomes partial (as it is the use), but also it lasts homogenizing the own name *shunga*.

Would all this amalgam of examples called *shunga* really have imposed itself in the same way? Would it not be better to consider that each one of the kinds in that production generalized as *shunga* foresaw markets and, therefore, different functions? Distant from the uses, would it be possible to discover witnesses in the *makura-e* itself, whose structures are drawn expressly for unleashing particular reactions? Could we anchor part of the causes of these more divulged uses (particularly the sexual stimulation) only in the creator, or also in the consumer, or further, in the object itself? If it was so, which would be the mechanisms and strategies?

We must revise, then, some observations concerning the relations among desire, images, and the *shunga*.

We will start by acknowledging that historically visuality has been marked by the prevalence of a male gaze. The history of images in Japan, of course, has not been free from the politics of vision, which have had a very particular space of materialization in the representation of sex, and in the different visions that traditionally were built by the male spectator, and which not only have evocated meanings but also have differed in the final act of the consumption, and have equally variegated the image elaboration process.

If we also take account of the image importance in the configuration processes of what we call “reality” or “world,” and in the proper consistence of the memory and experiences evocation, the necessity of the act of gazing acquires a strong relevance in our own human condition. We are creatures eager “to look.” This act, which is maybe one of the most powerful desires, helps us to define ourselves, in the same way we assume what we are. Then, this looking act will also work as a remembrance to the desire.

For strengthening the role of desire in this act of looking, it is important to have the image present, permanently at the ready. It must always be there, ready for the eye, disposed to reveal all its secrets. Therefore, the importance of the object possession, which adds itself as another component in the structural looking net, and particularly (as we mentioned before) of the gaze par excellence, the male gaze. The image has been assumed not only as a property and consumption goods, but also as a catalysis of desires that recreate in the mental level (and sometimes physical) experiences unavoidably originator of the chemical reactions that affect or inebriate the physical environment of our body.

Now, what should we look for in the *shunga*? Or, better, what was looked for in the *shunga* in the Edo period? Here, again, we can return to the unending circle of the infinite possibilities. Consumption? Entertainment? The object itself? Virtual desires of luxury, or status? Trying a virtual Yoshiwara? Sharing mentally with a whore, a woman or a famous *kabuki* actor? Making sexual fantasies true? Getting free from of your own every day practices? The probabilities in the answers, again, will depend on the dialectics between a private image and a private owner, on the conventions which are used for the building of such desire, and on the ways in which these conventions work in a particular context.

However, this “sex desire embodiment,” in case of *shunga*, can be tracked through resources abundance that emphasizes it: genitals, objects, details, colors, absences, gossipers, lens, mirrors, angles etc. For a better organization in the relation of many strategies of representation and of the

more representative selection criterions for these aims of which *makura-e* makes use, I will sustain myself with the idea of “good visibility” conceived by the Spanish researcher Román Gubern.

One of them is the anatomic fragmentation. This mechanism, which segments these body parts considered of great importance due to the concentration of the erotic attention (genitals and the faces), is maybe the most frequently one used in *shunga*. Almost always, still, it is accompanied by the ways in which the characters clothes and other accessories (like curtains, sliding doors, mosquito-curtains or bedspreads) are disposed, which often have a level of details and colors that contrasts with the body whiteness and accents the same segmentation. Other times, this fragmentation walks contrarily to the clear exhibition of the genitals, and make good use of the more different objects in scene in order to multiply the visual access to these fractional areas, or, to the opposite effect, hide them to stimulate the receptor fantasy, who has to complete “what is absent,” thus.

The proximity of the sexual component will be another effective ingredient in these conventions that *makura-e* incorporates. It is possible due to three maneuvers that we can appreciate in the following examples. Firstly, the arrangements in the figures composition and disposition which allow us a clear access to the center of the dominant visual stimulus, that is, the genitals. This solution in the examples is possible by not sheltering the genital area, putting the point of view in a field with easy visibility, or making a big *close-up*. The second and third ingredients are directly related with the human body changes, or of its parts: the body disarticulation and the exaggerated dimensions of the genitals (male and female). Both are also oriented to reach a clearness in the focus of the visual attention center, while rupture completely with any kind of consideration about the “anatomic correction.” They are, maybe, the two of the *shunga* characteristics which continue directing attention nowadays, and from which even the Edo inhabitants were not distant, as this book extract *Kinsei fūzoku-shi*, by Kitagawa Morisada, 1863, shows us:

If a person observes the present *shunga*, notices that the penis is surprisingly big and doesn't maintain any relation with the human being. Besides, it is totally disproportionate.

Frequently, in these categorizations, the whole load is adjudicated to the spectator, not to the image. Being certain that the major weight resides in the ways a consumer appropriates the object and, therefore, in the ways it is seen and classified in the cultural community where it was inserted, it is important to remember that the artist has also the capacity of inducing answers and interpretations determined from the representation itself, and that the image, too, never stays indifferent nor ingenuous in its relationships with the receivers.

This characteristic of images, and the *shunga*'s in particular, of promoting answers marked by the sexual stimulation which are induced by signs nets, and that we can call “promotive effect,” is perfectly sustainable on account of the impressing variety of the examples we can consider as part of the *makura-e* engraves production, and of the proper manifestation heterogeneity.

Here, finally, we come back to an essential aspect of our starting point in this proximity to *shunga*, the desire and representation: the manner the different cultural communities of various countries, that have interacted with these objects and images for almost three centuries, interpreted, used, remodeled them, and, therefore, the impossibility of “seeing” or “reading” in the same ways

or monolithically to these productions. With a lot of recurrence we have observed that it has been tried to show the *shunga* in one or another way; still more, that it is supposed that such manifestation is completely absolute, unalterable and perpetual, showing us that “this” is or was the *shunga*, or “this another” is not or was not the *shunga*, and neglecting that, independently of its materiality, these images and objects called *shunga* and *makura-e* were and are built socially, and that their biographies and futures go beyond the past practices and our present considerations.