

VI. FACES AND GENITALIA IN PROPORTION

Question 6. When we look at *shunga* we cannot help but notice the exaggerated bodies and contorted positions. Was ukiyo-e *shunga* used as a manual of sex?

A. We find all kinds of techniques and innovations in *shunga*, and among them are some examples that aim to be manuals for sexual techniques. However, there are only a few, perhaps less than ten, among the as many as 800 *shunga* books.

It is often remarked that *shunga* includes exaggerated depictions of male genitalia. We cannot help but notice this. When we look carefully we notice that in fact the vulva is also proportionately big. This only makes sense. From the latter half of the eighteenth century we see that there is a balance equal in size between the heads and the genitalia. And further that both are drawn with equal detail. When we examine carefully we cannot help but think that the artist aimed for us to focus on the genitalia. If we only look at the sexual depiction, then we can see why some would suggest that it is like *hentai* manga, but ukiyo-e *shunga*'s real aim is different, as we will see below.

A key point is that both the faces and the genitalia are invariably presented as a balanced composition. Furthermore, the images do not focus only on the genitalia, always setting the faces in equal proportion. In focusing on the sexual act and the faces in parallel, the impact is that the composition of the bodies naturally becomes distorted. When we look at grand works by Utamaro or Hokusai, we see that in order to frame the genitalia and faces in balance on the same flat surface the bodies cannot help but become somewhat misshapen. Commentators often note the acrobatic nature of *shunga*; we can suppose that the artists did not intend to contort the body, but that once it became conventional to draw the sex organs and faces in parallel proportion, the effect was to distort the composition as a whole. This aspect of artistic license seems to have been well understood by the Edo populace, as is evident in the following *senryū* comic haiku.

Foolish couple / imitating *shunga* / sprained back

This kind of representation of the body might offer us a deeper meaning, revealing symbolically an important aspect of Japanese culture. If we consider that the human face is a symbol of the public or surface in society, then the genitalia are a symbol of the private or hidden. This supposition allows us to interpret the convention of making both face and penis/vulva the same size as representing the juxtaposition of the public and private

that is always both in conflict and in interaction, and can never be completely separated; therefore, presenting the human condition as complex and dynamic.

28. *Ehon komachi biki* 絵本小町引 (Picture Book: Pulling Komachi) (image 5)
 Kitagawa Utamaro (1753–1806). Set of thirteen *ōban* color woodblock prints. 1802.

The pair are wearing light kimono and we see a fan, indicating lovers on a summer eve. Their bodies are definitely contorted like acrobats, the woman above but on her back. Even that is difficult enough but the man has his left leg intertwined with the leg of the woman, and the woman's face is turned as she kisses him. This position would surely lead to sprained muscles.

The text is full of coded references to contemporary well known “men about town.” Utamaro often included such references to his close associates, and his fans understood who the individuals were.

Man: “No matter how much Yamaguchi and Tennō love sex, the ones who are the most obsessed must be me and Sekimata. Above us one level up is surely Kanai



Figure 28

Zenkō and Tsuchiya Kashirō. Before Kashirō has intercourse, he first masturbates once making his dick go flaccid.”

Woman: “I imagine that Kashirō’s dick must look like his big head. I don’t like that kind. That works well with widows.”

Man: “I like fucking while kissing. It’s like nailing down both the top and bottom.”

Woman: “In summer it is good to try a different position like today. The breeze comes in on my bottom and feels cool.”

Man: “But when I come, you can’t squeeze me, so it’s not so good for me. Instead of you grabbing me, I’ll squeeze you tightly for both of us.”

29. *Uta makura* 歌まくら (Poems of the Pillow) (image 5)

Kitagawa Utamaro (1753–1806). Set of twelve *ōban* color woodblock prints. 1788.

The hat seen in this image is now worn at Japanese weddings, but in the Edo period it was worn by women in service at samurai residences when they were outside traveling home or on duty. In ukiyo-e *shunga*, the image of such a woman on holiday after a long period on duty meeting her lover is a common motif, but here the man she is with



Figure 29

is ugly and clumsy looking, so we can imagine that he is a lower-ranking foot soldier accompanying a samurai party on an outing. They seem to have rented a room in an inn for their tryst. Perhaps the woman doesn't have a lover to secretly meet, and decides that this fellow will have to do for the moment. If we follow this interpretation, we can see that the man is utterly delighted at the treat he gets, and that the woman in contrast is dreaming about something else far away. She's nibbling on the tissue roll and preparing for when he finishes.

The focus of this image is definitely the in-your-face presentation of the sex organs, and the faces of the pair in juxtaposition. As a consequence their bodies are bent unnaturally, and attempts to imitate them would lead to sprained limbs.

30. *Nami chidori* 浪千鳥 (Plovers on the Waves) (image 10)

Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849). Set of twelve *ōban* woodblock prints with hand coloring. Ca. 1816.

Image of a diver woman and a fisherman along the seashore. This set was based on the series *Fukujusō* that we have seen above. The original ink block, without the text, was



Figure 30

printed in black and then the color was applied by hand. If we read the text for the original version of this image, we learn that the pair are lovers, but the woman is flighty and is rumored to have several lovers. The man forcefully probes these rumors with her, but the woman deflects his anger and gets him to make love to her.

Again we see that the focus is the contrast of faces and genitalia—both are given equal prominence. Having both of them with their faces forward suits this frame. The woman's right leg is unnaturally turning backwards, perhaps again to accentuate the parallel composition and forefront the genitalia.

**31. *Shikidō tokkumi jūnitsugai* 色道取組十二番
(Twelve Couplings of the Way of Love) (image 4)**

Isoda Koryūsai (ac. 1764–1789). Set of twelve *ōban* color woodblock prints. Ca. 1777.

This is similar to the previous one but what is particular about this image is the use of the mirror to look at their own privates and at the same time to show it to the viewer. The man says, “Look, this view is really fascinating,” as he gets excited, but the woman replies, “Oh, how embarrassing! It’s reflected in the mirror,” with annoyance. As we saw



Figure 31

in the “hell scroll” where Lord Enma’s secretary said of carnal desire, that it cannot be explained by “reason alone.” Here we see both a fascination and embarrassment in the exposure of sexual desire.

32. *Sode no maki* 袖の巻 (Scroll in the Sleeve)

Torii Kiyonaga (1752–1815). Set of twelve horizontal pillar color woodblock prints. Ca. 1785.

This series is in a narrow horizontal format. Pillar prints were originally vertical and for display like hanging scrolls. This work creates a horizontal “pillar” print of couplings as if cropped from a larger picture. The background is eliminated and bodies are trimmed to fit into the format, and the technique works to focus the view onto the faces and genitals.

The viewer is offered only little information on the figures to imagine the context and this becomes an element of its charm. Carefully crafted thick and thin lines fashion a flow of beautiful bodies and luxurious garments, creating a masterpiece of woodblock printing.



Figure 32-1. A mature woman with blackened teeth rides on top of the man. In contrast to this forthrightness of the woman, the man with his neck twisted seems to be smothered. The man is naked but the woman wears a yellow “*kihachijō*” kimono with a red undergarment, which hints at their relationship.



Figure 32-2. The woman wears a simple *obi* around her waist signaling that she is pregnant. The man takes her from behind, revealing a coupling of a pregnant young wife and a husband who still needs sex.



Figure 32-3. We can barely detect some hair under the woman’s arm as she raises her leg to let the man in. We imagine a lively woman who has prepared tissue at the pillow; the pair are ready to play to their hearts’ content.

33. *Kachō yojō: Azuma Genji* 花鳥余情吾妻源氏

(Deep Feelings of Birds and Flowers, Genji of the East) (vol. 1, image 4)

Utagawa Kunisada (1786–1864). Color woodblock printed *ōhon* book, 3 vols. Ca. 1837.



Figure 33

Scene of a middle-aged couple in a tenement house. A lamp near their pillows shines light on their naked bodies, bringing their faces and genitals into relief, and so we can see from this technique the aim of the artist to focus our attention on these.

34. *Manpuku wagōjin* 万福和合神

(Gods of Myriad Conjugal Delights) (vol. 1, opening image)

Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849). Color woodblock printed *hanshibon* book, 3 vols. 1821.

The male and female gods of conjugal harmony (*wagōjin*), which usually have tousled hair, appear in *shunga* with genitals in the place of faces. This symbolizes the intimate relations of a couple and is based on a popular belief that praying to them will lead to happiness. In the first quarter of the nineteenth century these gods were popularly shown laughing together. It was a brilliant innovation to extend this symbol of conjugal happiness by transforming the faces into sex organs.



Figure 34

35. *Shunshoku hatsune no ume* 春色初音之六女
(Spring Colors: First Cry of the Warbler on the Plum, or Spring Passions:
First Cries of Six Women) (vol. 2, back cover image; vol. 3, back cover image)
Utagawa Kunisada (1786–1864). Color woodblock printed *ōhon* book, 3 vols. 1842.

This is a highly unusual set of images. The first image has genitals in place of faces, and the faces down below. The second image continues the narrative and has the “heads” engaged in intercourse and the “faces” kissing. Why did Kunisada create such images? Let’s look at the accompanying text:



Figure 35-1. On Amanojaku (The Evil that Raises Its Head).

Long ago there were stories about Amanojaku (the evil that raises its head). He would always do the opposite to whatever people did. If someone felt like going right, he would always say that going left was best. In the time of the ancient gods lived Amanosako-hime, but I have never seen mention of this kind of evil in those times. In our times, Amanojaku puts the faces and genitals of men and women backwards, the head is between the loins and the cock and vulva are on the shoulders, and so they have sex upside down. So, I drew this and look forward to the laughter it will bring.



Figure 35-2. Amanojaku Intercourse.

There are in fact some sources for this theory of Amanojaku. The Chinese miscellany *Wu za zu* 五雜俎 (Jp. *Gozasso*; 1619) recorded that there were women whose vulva was in their stomach and in their head. Further, in the Chin period under Emperor Yuan (276–322), among his concubines there was one whose vulva was in her stomach. She was lecherous but couldn't conceive. Another had her vulva in her neck. This woman, too, was passionate. There seem to have been rare cases like these in China. However, there were no stories of faces between the loins and genitals

in their heads. Further, to go in was to go out; good was bad, and did that mean orgasm? This was all a fantasy meant to be a good joke.

Today people think of Amanojaku as creatures who oppose anything people say, but in ancient times it was thought that this came from Amanosagume (Princess who seeks things in the heavens), and that, as this name indicates, it meant to seek deeply to understand the movements of the heavens and the hearts of men and women. Later this legend was mixed with other stories about ogres who tricked humans by playing on their desires, and stories of demons who were symbols of evil in Buddhism, and evolved into the meaning we have today. However, if we consider the original meaning while analyzing this work, we can see how clever the technique is in exploring aspects of sexual fantasy.