

Who Were the Audiences for *Shunga*?

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The image today of works that depict sex explicitly is that they are the sole playthings of lascivious men. However, in this article I examine a wide range of sources and conclude that in the Edo period it was not only men who appreciated *shunga*, but that women were also customers. Further, there clearly was interest in *shunga* from the young and old, regardless of status or location, and included commoners in the cities, farmers, as well as first-class intellectuals and powerful daimyos. The sources clearly show the wide range of interest in *shunga* in the period. We can also see that *shunga* was not simply for stimulating sexual desire, but aimed to depict a wide range of aspects of sexuality.

In particular, popular ukiyo-e *shunga* was widely available through the extensive network system of itinerant lending-libraries (*kashihon'ya*). Book-lenders would carry new and reprinted *shunga* books and travel from house to house, and lend them for a relatively inexpensive fee. They were known to always have the most up-to-date *shunga* books and print series, in response to customer demand. It is thought that in most cases it was the women of the house who received the orders from these book-lenders, as they did for other deliveries, and therefore, we can imagine with confidence that *shunga* works often first passed through women's hands.

Keywords: *shunga*, lending libraries, *kashihon'ya*, wedding trousseau, *shunga* as talisman, *Gasen*, Ogyū Sorai, Ōta Nanpo, Kawaji Toshiakira, Mori Ōgai.

One characteristic of *shunga* in the Edo period (1603–1868) is the enormous quantity of production of both paintings and woodblock prints. Among printed works, there are books (often in three volumes with at least ten images per volume), sets of twelve prints, and small format (*koban surimono* 小判摺物) prints. These small format prints were often exchanged as New Year greetings: we cannot know the total number produced for certain, but we can estimate that huge numbers were printed. As for books or sets of prints in book form, we can document the existence of about fifteen hundred works, and know altogether of more than two thousand titles in the Edo period. Print runs for such works were typically between two hundred and one thousand, and popular works were reprinted and sometimes new sets of blocks created. Scholars now believe that the quantity of published *shunga* books and prints

that circulated in Edo Japan was truly vast. This is in spite of the official Tokugawa edict banning erotic books (*kōshokubon* 好色本) from 1722.

This essay will explore, through both *shunga* and non-*shunga* sources, the range of audiences that *shunga* books, prints and paintings commanded, and the perceptions of its function and use in the Edo to Meiji periods. My hypotheses are: one, that *shunga* was a relatively integral if private aspect of Edo period society; two, that it was widely available through networks of itinerant lending libraries (*kashihon'ya* 貸本屋); and three, that it was commonly owned and/or viewed by men and women, old and young, alone and/or with



Figure 1. “Kashihon'ya” 貸本屋 from *Oshiegusa nyōbō katagi jūippen* 教草女房形氣十一編 by Utagawa Toyokuni 歌川豊国. 1866. Collection of Tōyō Bunko.



Figure 2. From vol. 2 of *Edo miyage* 艶図美哉花 by Katsukawa Shunchō 勝川春潮. 1787. International Research Center for Japanese Studies.

others, and by the full range of classes and occupations. It was also thought popularly to have spiritual powers to ward off fire, keep warriors safe in battle, and enhance fertility, and it was considered important as an auspicious element of a bridal trousseau.

Although we know that there was a tremendous amount of *shunga* production during the Edo period, it is not easy to determine exactly how and by whom they were appreciated. We cannot view them naïvely as presenting facts about the sexual life of the Japanese of those times. It is clear that they presented imagined fantasy, like other literature and art. Nevertheless, like literature and art in general, they mirrored the imagination of their creators and audience. Using *shunga* sources, together with other literary and historical sources, we can begin to get a clearer idea of how this fantasy world of *shunga* was enjoyed by men and women, old and young.

If we were to estimate the numbers of those who enjoyed erotic books (*shunpon* 春本, *ehon* 艶本), the figure would not just be limited to those who purchased books. It was common practice in the Edo period to lend books among friends, and there was a well-developed system of commercial lending libraries, especially in the cities but with networks throughout the country by the mid-Edo period, whereby itinerant merchants would make their rounds regularly to individual homes lending books at a modest price. We know that these lending libraries also carried erotic books and sets of *shunga* prints, and supplied orders for such materials. It was also the case that it was usually women in the household who received these orders, and therefore that *shunga* first passed through female hands. The book-lender appears within *shunga* showing erotic books to customers, sometimes with ulterior motives (Figures 1 and 2).

Figure 2 is from the book *Edo miyage* 艶図美哉花 (1787) by Katsukawa Shunchō 勝川春潮 and shows a book lender visiting a client's home, where he is showing books to a mother and her daughter. He is showing the daughter pictures from an erotic book. The dialogue says:

Book Lender: "Now, how about this one. It is a fine book."

Daughter: "No, not for me! These books all go to mother."

Book Lender: "I don't believe that. This is a book I really think you should see."

On the next page, we see the young book-lender seducing the young woman. Book-lenders, who do not appear to have been the object of censorship, were an important means for the circulation of erotic books, and the poor condition of most extant works attests to their popularity. Among the many erotic books that I have examined, it is common that the edges are well-fingered to the point that the ink of the texts and pictures has rubbed off. These books most likely circulated among friends or were part of book-lenders' stock. We can therefore surmise that in the Edo period erotic books were enjoyed broadly across the country, including in castle towns and in the more remote areas that itinerant book-lenders included in their rounds.

Since *shunga* depict sexuality in an extremely explicit manner, when Japanese people today think about who enjoyed *shunga* during the Edo period, many believe that it is like modern pornography or contemporary erotic photography, and that young men used it to stimulate masturbation, or that it was only for lascivious men. Therefore, it is usually

considered to be “smut” or “obscene” or “disgusting,” and something that “we should be embarrassed to view.” However, one characteristic of Edo period *shunga* is that it was apparently appreciated and enjoyed by all ages, and not only men but women, too, were consumers. In terms of class and location, from the poorest city dweller and farmer in the country, to the upper class intellectual and daimyo lord, we find that *shunga* was a part of life at all levels of society.

In this article, I will focus on records from the Edo period that show the wide range of individuals who enjoyed *shunga*. These are important sources to help us understand how people in the Edo period regarded and experienced sexuality.

1. Women and *Shunga*

“Pornography,” as such, is a modern construct of nineteenth-century Europe although common usage of the word now in Japan or other countries broadly refers to explicit sexual works that are aimed to stimulate arousal. The common contemporary “polite” view of pornography in Japan is that it is obscene and tends to be aimed at lecherous men, but there are a considerable number of sources from the Edo period that suggest that women too were fans of *shunga*. One early example from 1748 is from the jōruri 浄瑠璃 (and later kabuki) play *Kanadehon chūshingura* 仮名手本忠臣蔵 (Treasury of Loyal Retainers), based on the actual 1703 samurai vendetta of the forty seven *rōnin*. There are some interesting lines spoken by the merchant Amakawaya Gihei, who is helping the *rōnin* obtain weapons. He has hidden the weapons in some large chests and is preparing to load these onto boats for transporting from Osaka to Edo. At this point enemy soldiers arrive and demand to inspect the chests.

When the soldiers try to open the chest, Gihei runs up and kicks them, and plops down on top of the chest with his legs crossed. He declaims: “This long box contains personal articles ordered by the wife of a certain daimyo, including *shunga* books and sex toys. Her name is written on each article, even on the order for the erotic materials. If you open the box you will be exposing to public view the name of a great family. And seeing this name may endanger your lives.”¹

After hearing Gihei’s words, the soldiers withdraw, but the point to note here is that the soldiers believed Gihei, that a daimyo’s wife could be a customer for erotic books and sex toys. This implies that the audience of the time would also accept this assumption as being true. We can conclude that whether it was true or not, it was commonly expected that high-born ladies would be interested in and enjoy *shunga*, even if they wished to keep this from public view.

Other sources that describe women and *shunga* are *senryū* 川柳, comic haiku, as well as lines within *shunga* works themselves. *Senryū* as a genre tend to make jest of the peculiarities of all kinds of people. There are many that refer to sex and *shunga* in particular. They can offer us insight into how *shunga* was viewed by the common people. Here are some examples:²

1 Takeda and Namiki 1929, p. 234. Trans. adapted from Keene 1971, p. 158.

2 Yamamoto 1982, p. 219.

1. A princess-bride with her *shunga* in a sealed wrapper:
 On her wedding day
 The princess bride, for the first time,
 Breaks the seal on the *shunga* wrapper.
 [Yanagidaru 柳多留, vol. 132, 1833]

2. Ladies in the lord's entourage, and the "rocks offshore" metaphor:
 (Rocks offshore are always wet below tide level. The image is originally from a classical poem expressing a woman's loneliness and her tears that no one can see. The same metaphor is used in *shunga* to indicate a woman's vagina wet with desire.)
 Looking at *shunga*
 The Lord's ladies, like the "rocks offshore,"
 Are wet below, out of sight.
 [Yanagidaru 柳多留, vol. 77, 1823]

3. A nurse showing *shunga* to her charge:
 The nurse early on
 Shows the young lord
 Her favourite erotic book.
 [Manku awase 万句合, 1780]

Senryū no. 1 above refers to a young upper class lady seeing *shunga* the first time on her wedding day. We have another reference to women and the use of *shunga* in a bridal trousseau. Mitamura Engyo 三田村鷹魚 (1870–1952) wrote in an article on erotic pictures (*abuna-e* 阿武奈絵, literally "risqué pictures") in 1925:

For the weddings of daimyo lords and the shogun's retainers, sets of twelve *shunga* would always be include in the bride's trousseau. They would have elegant wrappings and were always presented as a set of twelve images... Even today these families have old *shunga* paintings that are six or seven hundred years old. There are many more recent examples in the households of Edo period daimyo and courtiers.³

In fact it was a custom among not only upper class families but also wealthy families of all classes to include *shunga* in the bridal trousseau. These were perceived as a talisman for promoting good and intimate conjugal relations, the birth of children, and consequently the success of the household.

Reporting my own experience, recently I have become known for building up a collection of *shunga* at the International Research Center for Japanese Studies (Nichibunken) in Kyoto, and for publications on *shunga*, and I occasionally receive letters or phone calls from women over the age of eighty. They want to ask me what to do with their *shunga*, saying something like: "When I got married I received *shunga* from my mother and have always kept them as a precious treasure. However, I am worried that after I die, my son and daughter will find them and will surely wonder why I had them. If possible, I would

³ Mitamura 1977, pp. 413–14.

like to donate them to the International Research Center for Japanese Studies, and have them contribute to research on *shunga*.” Up till now I have received such inquiries from Kanazawa city, Tokushima city, Shizuoka city, Osaka, Hiroshima and Tokyo. Examples like this exist from all around the country and the custom seems to have continued until about fifty years ago. These examples also show how much attitudes have changed since the mid-twentieth century.

Senryū no. 2 needs some explanation. The metaphor of “rocks offshore” can be traced to a poem by the court lady Nijōin Sanuki 二条院讃岐 (1141?–1217), who was lonely and tearful due to neglect by her lover:

My sleeves/are never dry/like the rocks offshore/
always under the tide/yet no one knows.

*waga sode walshiobi ni mienuki no ishi no/
hito koso shirane/kawaku ma mo nashi*
我が袖は汐干に見へぬ沖の石の人こそ知らね乾く間もなし

This poem was well known as one of the *Hyakunin issbu* 百人一首 (One Hundred Poems by One Hundred Poets), which was a fundamental educational text and the basis of a popular New Year card game. The joke here is the contrast between the classical reference to being wet with tears, and the daimyo’s attendant being wet down below after viewing *shunga*.

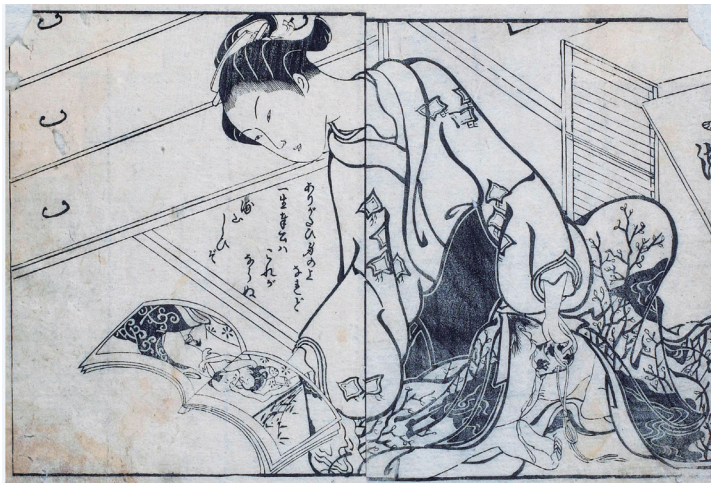


Figure 3. From vol. 1 of *Fūryū sandai makura* 風流三代枕 by Kikukawa Hidenobu 菊川秀信. 1765. International Research Center for Japanese Studies.

Figure 3 shows a lady in a samurai residence looking at *shunga* and using a dildo to pleasure herself. The lady’s thoughts are written as:

I am grateful to have this status in a samurai residence, but here in the lord’s entourage
I am not free to have sex. I’m envious of this woman in the picture.



Figure 4. From *Toko no okimono* 床の置物 by Hishikawa Moronobu 菱川師宣. Ca. 1682. International Research Center for Japanese Studies.



Figure 5. From vol. 3 of *Shunjō yubi ningyō* 春情指人形 by Keisai Eisen 溪斎英泉. Ca. 1838. Private collection.

Women in samurai or court service were, as a rule, not allowed to leave the residence and were forbidden to have relations with the opposite sex. In *shunga* we see scenes showing merchants, who came regularly to sell items to these sequestered women, also bringing *shunga* and dildos (Figure 4). Whether or not this is true is debatable, but it was part of the popular imagination that women of all classes enjoyed *shunga*.

Senryū 3 refers to a wet nurse within a samurai family who is teaching reading and writing to the young heir, and who shows the youth a *shunga* book (Figure 5). In the picture the nurse says to the youth:

Have a look at this picture. See how you can put your hand in this way. See the text in the picture. Now quickly turn to the next page. There is something interesting above the image. Well, then, just like in the picture, please do it to me. I'm already blushing.

She is using the *shunpon* as a kind of sex education book and tool of seduction. In fact, she gets aroused before the youth. The *senryū* and the *shunga* image are making jest of the proclivities of those in upper class houses, and we can surmise that *shunga* was a part of life among the upper classes as well.

Another example of women viewing *shunga*, dating from the late-Edo period and published in the Meiji era, is by the famous writer Mori Ōgai 森鷗外 (1862–1922), included in his autobiographical novel *Vita Sexualis* (1909), in which he describes his sexual experiences. The setting is a samurai residence in the remote castle town of Tsuwano in presentday Shimane prefecture. The event occurred when Ōgai, the son of a feudal lord's doctor, was six years old.

Across a vacant lot was the Ohara house. The husband had died, and the widow, who was about forty, lived there all alone. All of a sudden I felt like calling on her, and I ran around to the front of the house and rushed inside.

Kicking off my straw sandals and clattering open the sliding doors, I hurried in, only to find the widow and a young woman I had never seen before examining a book together. The girl's kimono was adorned with red patterns, her *shimada* hairdo in the style of an unmarried woman. Even though I was only a small boy, I knew that she came from the center of town. They looked up at me as if I had really startled them. The face of each was deep red. I was merely a child, but I felt their behavior was unusual, quite strange. When I happened to glance down at the page of their opened book, I noticed it was beautifully printed in color.

“Madam, what kind of picture book's that?”

I walked straight up to them. The girl laid the book face down and looked at the widow and laughed. The cover of the book was also printed in color and I happened to notice on it the large face of a woman.

The widow snatched the book from the girl, opened it, and holding it out in front of me pointed to something in the picture.

“Shizu, what do you think this is?” she said.

The girl's laugh was even louder this time. I glanced at the page, but the position of the persons in the picture was so complicated I couldn't make it out.

“This is a leg, isn't it?” said the widow.

Both the widow and the girl laughed together out loud. I realized it couldn't possibly have been a leg. I had the feeling they were treating me with contempt.

“See you again, Madam!”

Without even listening for the widow to tell me to wait, I ran out the door.⁴

This passage describes a scene from the very end of the Edo period, depicting two samurai women enjoying *shunga*. Ōgai is of course creating a fictional work from the memories of

⁴ Mori 1972, pp. 34–35.

his youth, but he was also writing about the culture of *shunga* and sexual mores at the turn of the twentieth century when they were being actively suppressed by the Meiji government. The relative frankness of the book on sexual matters (however seemingly innocent to our eyes today) caused it to be censored and banned within a month after publication. It is clear from this and other passages in the novel that *shunga* was still a more natural part of life for men and women in the early Meiji era.

Pornography is usually thought to be aimed primarily at men for their private use, and it is likely that the largest market for *shunga* was men. However, in *shunga* there are many images of women enjoying *shunga*, presenting a discourse that it was natural for women to look at *shunga*. Figure 6 shows a widow looking at an erotic book; Figure 7 shows two young women on a winter's evening sitting around a *kotatsu* brazier enjoying a *shunga* scroll. These images together with Ōgai's account of his experience as a child, give us a vivid picture of the reception of *shunga* in the Edo period.



Figure 6. From vol. 1 of *Ōyogari no koe* 逢夜雁之声 by Utagawa Toyokuni 歌川豊国. 1822. International Research Center for Japanese Studies.



Figure 7. From *Ehon kantan makura* 笑本邯鄲枕 by Takehara Shunchōsai 竹原春朝齋. Ca. 1777. International Research Center for Japanese Studies.

Another interesting reference to women and *shunga* appears in a recent book by Andrew Gerstle:

Francis Hall (1822–1902), an American businessman and journalist, arrived in Yokohama in November 1859 almost immediately after the opening of the port to American and Europeans the year before. During his first month in Japan he explored Yokohama and records three entries 26, 28 November and 5 December 1859 in which he describes being shown “vile pictures executed in the best style of Japanese art.” At his visit to a shop on 26 November:

I was about to go when the old gentleman reached to the top of a case of drawers and took down ten boxes carefully wrapped up. He undid them and out of each box took three books full of vile pictures [*shunga*] executed in the best style of Japanese art, accompanied with letter press. We were alone in the room, the man, wife and myself. He opened the books at the pictures, and the wife sat down with us and began to “tell me” what beautiful books they were. This was done apparently without a thought of anything low or degrading commensurate with the transaction. I presume I was the only one whose modesty could have been possibly shocked. This is a fair sample of the blunted sense and degraded position of the Japanese as to ordinary decencies of life. These books abound and are shamelessly exhibited. The official that comes into your house will pull perhaps an indecent print from his pocket. I have known this to be done.

This first encounter was at a shop but the next encounter was different. He is no less surprised by the attitude towards sexuality the second time two days later on 28 November at a private home, which he describes as prim and immaculately neat, praising the wife: “Her housekeeping was a credit to her.” After being shown some of their treasures,

He [the husband] then went to a drawer and brought something which he said was very valuable, and suiting the action to the end, placed in my hands three or four very obscene pictures [*shunga*]. His wife stood close by and it was apparent from the demeanor of both that there was not a shadow of suspicion in their minds of the immodesty of the act or of the pictures themselves. They had shown them as something really very choice and worth looking at and preserved them with great care. They brought us some refreshments consisting of cold roasted sweet potatoes, a lime and persimmons, with hot water in teacups for drinking.

He offers one more reference a few days later to vile pictures on porcelain saucers and mentions his friend seeing erotic masks and children’s toys in Edo. All this he considered “evidence of the depraved taste of this people.” Hall was not a prudish missionary but his reaction shows a clearly different attitude to openness on sexuality, particularly as regards women. What was hard for him to understand was how a seemingly proper and model wife in a good home could be entirely unashamed in viewing erotic art together with other men.⁵

5 Gerstle 2011, pp. 28–32. The diary quotations are from Notehelfer 1992, pp. 81–82.

Other references in the diary further suggest that Japanese were less inhibited about the display of erotic works in their homes. The behavior of these two late Edo period women seemed remarkable to Hall for their frankness about *shunga*, and would seem ironically striking to Japanese men and women today. It contrasts greatly with “proper” Japanese attitudes, at least since World War II, that any kind of erotic image is obscene and must be kept hidden and not openly shown in the home or in public, and is something of which to be ashamed.

2. High-ranking Samurai and the Enjoyment of *Shunga*

The above quotation from Hall stating that he saw “vile pictures executed in the best style of Japanese art” suggests that he was shown paintings in the Kanō style, the official style of the Tokugawa government. Paintings in Tosa and other traditional styles also survive and indicate that upper-class patrons commissioned *shunga*. Lower status ukiyo-e artists in fact produced by far the most *shunga*, which is mostly in print form. The Tokugawa government at least three times issued censorship edicts banning the publication of *shunga* books, and so it is commonly thought that official Kanō painters did not produce *shunga*. Paintings, however, were never the object of censorship, only printed books and print series were officially banned, suggesting that it was primarily the wide dissemination of *shunga* in print form and its possible impact on the lower classes that was the concern of government.

The painting manual *Gasen* 畫筌, published in 1721 (preface 1712), includes a chapter on “*Kōshoku shunga* [glossed as both ‘*shunga*’ and ‘*makura-e*’] *no hō*” 好色春画之法 (On the Art of Drawing Erotic *Shunga*). *Gasen*, in six volumes, was composed by Hayashi Moriatsu 林守篤 and elucidates the theory of Kanō-style painting and training in practical skill, together with a wide range of painting examples. It was very popular among aspiring painters and went through many editions into the Meiji era (1868–1912). His teacher was Ogata Yūgen 尾形幽元 (1643–1683), a disciple of Kanō Tanyū 狩野探幽 (1602–1674), the artist who established the Kanō school as the Edo shogunate’s official painting academy (Figure 8-1).



Figure 8-1. Cover of *Gasen* 畫筌, ed. Hayashi Moriatsu 林守篤. Itamiya 伊丹屋 edition, 1721. Private collection.



Figure 8-2. From vol. 5 of *Gasen* 畫筌, ed. Hayashi Moriatsu 林守篤. Itamiya 伊丹屋 edition, 1721. Private collection.

“On the art of drawing erotic *shunga*” appears as a supplement at the end of Chapter five in the section on drawing the human figure. It explains how to draw the whole body, and then how to distinguish age, and finally how to draw particular parts of the body—hair, head, mouth, eyes, eyebrows—the outlines as well as the painting of color. It emphasizes the depiction of a beautiful woman’s face, and finally for drawing *shunga* it describes how to create the penis, vulva, pubic hair and semen, both the line drawing and application of color (Figure 8-2).

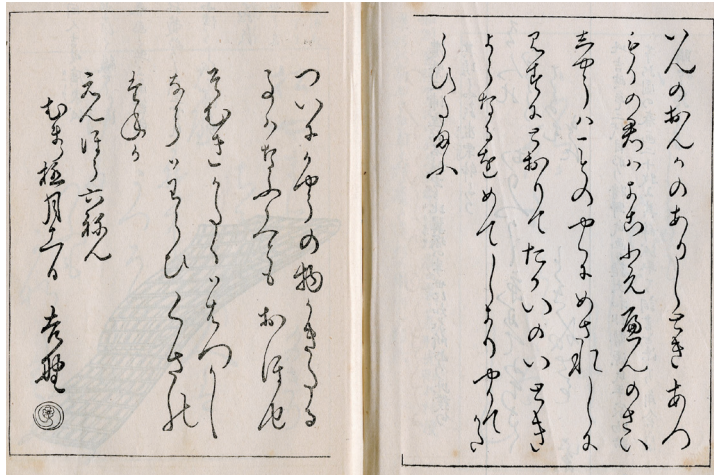


Figure 9. From *Suiyo shōroku* 睡餘小録 written by Kawazu Yoshimichi 河津吉迪, 1806. Repr. *Nihon zuibitsu taisei* 日本随筆大成 1:3. Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 1927, p. 479.

There are also records from the Edo period that note Kanō *shunga* paintings.⁶ One is *Suiyo shōroku* 睡餘小録. The author of this book was Kawazu Sanpaku 川津山白 (1777?–1807), an authority on painting from Kyoto, who copied and commented on the paintings and other art that he surveyed. Unfortunately he did not draw the Kanō *shunga* painting that he recorded, but only transcribed the text within the work (Figure 9). Below is his comment:

The signature of “Yoshino” is that of Yoshino Tayū II 吉野太夫 [a legendary courtesan known for her beauty, talent, and warmth]. In each of the twelve paintings depicting scenes from *Tales of Yamato*, *Tales of Ise*, *Tale of Genji* and *Tale of the Heike*, she wrote a text describing the scene. This was bought by a Mr. Suminokura, a wealthy Kyoto merchant.⁷

In the text transcribed from the paintings, there are the names “Atsumori” and “Ben no Saishō,” which implies that the painting was a scene from the *Tale of the Heike* depicting these two individuals. The date given is 1678. At that time the main Kanō artist in Kyoto

6 The British Museum exhibition and catalogue, *Shunga: Sex and Pleasure in Japanese Art* (forthcoming, 2013), will include an example of an early seventeenth century Kanō school *shunga* painting.

7 Kawazu Yoshimichi, p. 479.

was Kanō Einō 狩野永納 (1631–1697), so he could have been the artist, except that Yoshino Tayū II (1606–1643) lived earlier, so the timing would not seem to match. It is likely, therefore, that the text was in fact by a later Yoshino.

One of the reasons that Kanō school artists painted *shunga* is that it was common in upper level samurai households to give *shunga* as a wedding gift. Kanō painters worked as artists in residence for daimyo and we can surmise that the creation of *shunga* paintings was one of their duties. Many paintings are likely to still survive in storehouses around the country.

Another reason for commissions is mentioned by the scholar Mitamura Engyo in his 1925 article, previously referred to: “It was common practice for daimyo and hatamoto 旗本 retainers in each generation to create a set of armor, and it was the custom to include one *shunga* scroll in the armor chest.”⁸ This custom is referred to in many Edo period writings. Some examples are: *Baien nikki* 梅園日記 by the National Learning scholar Kita Seiro 北静蘆 (1766–1848), and *Enkyo zatsuwa* 燕居雜和 by the Confucian scholar Hio Keizan 日尾荆山 (1789–1859).⁹ In *Vita Sexualis*, Ōgai reports an episode when, as a ten-year-old, he discovered a *shunga* scroll in his father’s armor chest in the family storehouse.¹⁰ Recently I was shown an armor chest that included *shunga* in the household of a former samurai family from the Matsumoto fief (presentday Nagano Prefecture). The *shunga* was preserved carefully in fine *washi* 和紙 (Japanese paper). These *shunga* with their depictions of vigorous sexuality seemed to have served as a kind of talisman to invigorate warriors and protect them on the battlefield. This kind of protective power of *shunga* was also believed in by non-samurai, who had a practice of keeping *shunga* in their storehouses to keep fire away. In the Kyoto-Osaka area the *shunga* painted scrolls of Tsukioka Settei 月岡雪鼎 (1726–1786) were especially prized for this function.¹¹ We can argue that these functions of *shunga* as celebratory, auspicious, and protective did not develop entirely artificially but were based on a long tradition in Japan of belief in the power of sexual imagery and icons.

We have records from highly educated samurai that they enjoyed *shunga*, not for its mystical power, but simply as erotic art and literature. An early example is by the famous Confucian philosopher Ogyū Sorai 荻生徂徠 (1666–1728), who came from a high ranked samurai family. His father was official doctor to shogun Tsunayoshi 綱吉 (1646–1709) and his younger brother was doctor to shogun Yoshimune 吉宗 (1684–1751). From a young age he excelled at the study of Chinese philosophy, and boldly criticized Neo-Confucianism, which the Tokugawa government had introduced as the basis of its political system, as being a falsehood. He analyzed the *Analects* directly using philological methods and established a distinctive school of Confucianism. He was also active as a political thinker, offering advice directly to Yanagisawa Yoshiyasu 柳沢吉保 (1659–1714), who was senior councilor to Tsunayoshi and Yoshimune. Sorai’s views on *shunga* were recorded by the Hirado daimyo Matsura Seizan 松浦静山 (1760–1841) in his *Kasshi yawa* 甲子夜話 (1821–1841):

Sawada Tōyō told me the story about a certain individual who asked Sorai to write a poem on a *shunga*. Sorai is said to have responded immediately with the couplet.

8 Mitamura 1977, p. 414.

9 Kita Seiro, p. 377, and Hio Keizan, p. 255.

10 Mori 1972, pp. 38–42.

11 Gerstle 2011, p. 78.

The truths of the universe are indeed dark and deep.
All the mysteries of life are born through this dark gate.¹²

Sawada Tōyō 澤田東洋 (1804–1847) was an Edo Confucian scholar and calligrapher. Sorai's couplet written on the *shunga* painting is from the famous enigmatic opening passage of the Daoist treatise *Tao te ching* by Lao Tzu, and interpretations of its text vary. Why did Sorai write this verse on the painting? He must have made the connection between this mystical verse and the material body, finding sensuous eroticism in the words. We might interpret it to mean:

Deep in this dark place [vagina].
We find the gate from which all is born.

Seizan must have been impressed enough at the cleverness of this verse to decide to record it for posterity.

Another significant account comes from one of Sorai's pupils, senior councilor of the Yamato fief Yanagisawa Kien 柳沢淇園 (1704–1758), who was a *shunga* enthusiast. His literati name was Ryū Rikyō 柳里恭 and he was famous in his time for having talent in as many as sixteen arts, such as writing in Chinese, Buddhism, calligraphy, natural history, seal engraving, *tsuzumi* drum, *shamisen*, music, and popular literature. In the book *Hitori ne* ひとりね, written when he was about twenty, Kien comments on *shunga*:

This genre of books is very important for artists and scholars. After reading difficult 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.¹³

A daimyo from the same fief as Kien, Yanagisawa Nobutoki 柳沢信鴻 (1725–1792), recorded in *Enyū nikki*, his diary after retirement, "I had a five-volume book on the Bean-man (*Mame-emon* 豆衛門) sent to his wife Otaka."¹⁴

Another record is by Ōta Nanpo 大田南畝 (1749–1823), a highly successful Tokugawa government official, and a literatus fluent in classical Chinese and Japanese as well as in popular culture, who is known for his essays, *kyōka* 狂歌 poetry and popular fiction (Figure 10). His fashionable coterie in Edo was highly active and influential in the arts. We get a sense of how much Nanpo valued *shunga* from the records of his library,¹⁵ which included categories for *kōshoku* (erotic writings) and *shunga*, showing that he actively collected these works. In the category of *kōshoku* he began with the works of Ihara Saikaku and included Fujimoto Kizan's 藤本箕山 *Shikidō okagami* 色道大鑑 and Masuho Zankō's 増穂残口 *Endō tsugan* 艶道通鑑, among twenty-two *kōshoku* titles. In the category of *shunbu* 春部 we find, for example, painted albums and scrolls by Nishikawa Sukenobu 西川祐信 (1671–1750), erotic books by Hishikawa Moronobu 菱川師宣 (d. 1694), Suzuki Harunobu 鈴木春信 (d. 1770), and Hiraga Gen'nai 平賀源内 (1728–1780), and finally the Chinese *shunga* book

12 Matura Seizan, vol. 2, p. 119.

13 Yanagisawa Kien, p. 28.

14 Entry for 26th day, first month, 1783. Yanagisawa Nobutoki 1977, p. 683.

15 Ōta Nanpo 2001, pp. 114–16.

Fengliu jue chang tu 風流絶暢図 (Jp. *Fūryū zetchō zu*) and Tang *shunga* paintings, a total of twenty-one entries. Nanpo also listed two copies of ancient *shunga* scrolls: *Koshibagaki sōshi ekotoba* 小柴垣草子絵詞 (originally thought to be from around 1180) and the fourteenth-century scroll *Fukuro hōshi ekotoba* 袋法師絵詞.

Nanpo is also thought personally to have written at least two *shunga* books. One of these is the three-volume *Omeshi narumi zome* 御召名留美楚女 (c. 1821), which has illustrations in the style of Keisai Eisen 溪斎英泉 (1791–1848), and the two-volume *Higozuiki* 媼孀嬰 (c. 1822, Figure 11). Another is a book fully illustrated by Eisen, *Haruno usuyuki* 春野薄雪 (1822), which has a preface and extended text by Nanpo. Eisen was an ukiyo-e artist who was born a



Figure 10. Portrait of Ōta Nanpo 大田南畝 by Bunchōsai Eishi 鳥文齋栄之. 1814. Tokyo National Museum.



Figure 11. From vol. 1 of *Higozuiki* 媼孀嬰 by Ōta Nanpo 大田南畝. Ca. 1822. International Research Center for Japanese Studies.

samurai, and Nanpo may even have learned ukiyo-e from him. Aside from Eisen virtually all ukiyo-e artists, such as Harunobu, Isoda Koryūsai 磯田湖龍齋, Hosoda Eishi 細田栄之 (d. 1829), and Utagawa Hiroshige 歌川広重 (1797–1858) also created *shunga*.

Furthermore, Nanpo in his essay *Zokuji kosui* 俗耳鼓吹 (preface dated 1788) notes: “Yamaoka Matsuake told me that in *shunga* the convention of never drawing the arsehole of a woman has been common since Nishikawa Sukenobu’s time.”¹⁶ Yamaoka Matsuake 山岡浚明 (1726–1780) was a hatamoto Tokugawa retainer well known for his wide-ranging researches as a scholar of national learning and author of the large historical compendium *Ruiju meibutsu kō* 類聚名物考. Yamaoka’s statement on depictions of the female body in *shunga* before and after Sukenobu indicates that he must have examined a wide range of *shunga* works.

From the late Edo period, we have the example of Kyokutei Bakin 曲亭馬琴 (1767–1848), a prolific writer who was the son of a samurai retainer of the Tokugawa family (Figure 12). In 1803, in the record of his trip to Kamigata (the Kyoto-Osaka area) *Kiryō manroku* 羈旅漫録, Bakin recorded an unusual incident related to *shunga*:



Figure 12. Portrait of seventy years old Takizawa Bakin 滝沢馬琴 by Hasegawa Settan 長谷川雪旦. 1836. Collection of Waseda University Library.

Uzumasa sōshi is a comical *shunga* scroll from the Muromachi period (1336–1573). The original is said to be in the Shōkokuji Temple in Kyoto on Imadegawa-dōri. Hashimoto Tsuneakira came to my inn and asked me to buy a copy of this, but because the narrative text was incomplete, I returned it to him, with this poem.

“Grateful that you brought me the rare *Uzumasa emaki*, but regret that it was incomplete.”

Response:

“If not you, who might buy such an incomplete, faulty work?”¹⁷

Hashimoto Tsuneakira 橋本経亮 (1755–1805) was a Kyoto courtier who served as a priest at Umenomiya shrine and at the Imperial Palace, and he is known to have been a broad-minded and free-spirited scholar of national learning. The *Uzumasa sōshi* mentioned above is most likely another copy of *Fukuro hōshi emaki*, the same work that Nanpo also owned. This work begins with a scene along the Uzumasa river in Kyoto. We can gather from this account that it was common for respectable families to hold copies of famous ancient *shunga* scrolls. From the light-hearted poems that Bakin and Hashimoto exchanged, we get a sense of the broad-minded and unbridled nature of the relationships of many cultivated individuals of the time. We can also imagine that they were quite open when talking about sexual matters.

16 Ōta Nanpo 1926, p. 83.

17 Kyokutei Bakin, p. 192.

Finally, I would like to introduce the diary of Kawaji Toshiakira 川路聖謨 (1801–1868). Kawaji (Figure 13) was a Tokugawa official and served as a magistrate on Sado island, and in Nara and Osaka, as well as in the bureau for coastal security and external affairs. He was directly involved as an important official in diplomatic negotiations with Russia and the U.S.A. in the years leading to the opening of the country in the 1850s. Kawaji was known as an upright and proper gentleman with a warm personality and a lively sense of humor, and as a cultured individual and writer of *waka* poetry. He was loyal to the Tokugawa regime and on 15 March 1868, the day after the handing over of Edo castle to the new government, he committed suicide with both a sword (*seppuku* 切腹) and a pistol. He is known as the last loyal Tokugawa official who tied his fate to his lord. This upright government official talked about encounters with *shunga* in his diary *Naniwa nikki* 浪花日記 :



Figure 13. Photograph of Kawaji Toshiakira by Alexander Mozhaysky (1825–90), c. 1855. Historiographical Institute, University of Tokyo.

Second day, ninth month, 1851. Cloudy and raining. When I was at the shogun's castle talking with others, someone had heard that Mr. Asano owned a Hishikawa Moronobu *shunga* and that various people had borrowed it. Old Murata also asked to borrow it and took it home. He took it secretly to the second floor and viewed it just as if it were secret official documents, very carefully. When we heard this, everyone laughed aloud.

Asano was the high level hatamoto official Asano Nagayoshi 浅野長祚 (1816–1880), a collector of calligraphy and famous art critic and appraiser. Murata was the Tokugawa official Murata Norikatsu 村田矩勝 (1767–1851), who was eighty five years old at the time. He had worked with Kawaji earlier in their respective careers. This artless and honest fellow was taken in by Kawaji as one of his family. It was surprising for the others that this unsophisticated old man would want to borrow a Moronobu *shunga*. Kawaji commented further:

Long ago an old Zen priest related how he had been enticed by a young woman, but because the priest was like an old withered tree in winter, he had refused her and fled. His host, an old woman, after hearing this, said for a priest he was a liar, and kicked him out. In contrast to this, old Murata was honest in not denying his heart, and was more upright and serious. What do you [writing to his wife back in Osaka] think about this? Murata was a very serious man of eighty five years.¹⁸

Here when Kawaji refers to Murata as being upright and serious, he does not mean outwardly presenting a proper face to society; rather he praises him as someone who is not concerned about what others will think of him, no matter what he says or does. It is on this

18 Kawaji Toshiakira, pp. 95–96.

point that Kawaji asks his wife Sato's opinion. We have Sato's response to this in her own diary (16th day, ninth month, 1851). "I was really impressed and delighted to hear the story about venerable old Murata."¹⁹

Ujiie Mikito in his book *Edo no sei fūzoku* 江戸の性風俗 has analyzed this diary and its depiction of sexual matters.²⁰ He shows us persuasively that in the Kawaji household sexuality was openly discussed. Kawaji's diary is a rare record of frankness about private life and sexuality in Edo Japan. Was this relaxed attitude to sexuality only true for the Kawaji family? Or was this common among other samurai households? It is difficult to answer these questions because we do not have many records of personal life. However, the Kawaji diary does show us that it was not just Toshiakira but also his wife, brother, mother and his adopted child's family and in-laws and servants who participated in and enjoyed the lively banter and humor about sexual matters. Together with the other accounts above, we can surmise that the Kawaji family was not unusual in its attitudes.

Today, however, erotic images like *shunga* are thought to be primarily for young men or lascivious older men and remain a taboo in Japanese society. It is clear that there is a vast gulf between the Edo period and now. As Ishigami Aki shows in this issue, modern governmental suppression of *shunga* was gradual but eventually effective in depicting *shunga* as obscene pornography, and making it taboo as an academic subject. It is never easy definitively to document private practices, especially those to do with sex, of people who lived more than one hundred fifty years ago. Nevertheless, I believe we can conclude that various sources—both within *shunga* and from other literature/art, as well as diaries and private writings—show us that *shunga* circulated widely and was considered a natural aspect of Japanese life, albeit within the private domain, in spite of the fact that it was officially illegal. It was also considered by many to be protective as a talisman and to be auspicious as a bridal gift. I would like to conclude by saying that people in the Edo period viewed *shunga* and sexuality in general in different ways from Japanese in modern and contemporary times. It is time for the taboo to be lifted from *shunga* so that it can be critically studied and exhibited.

(Translated by C. Andrew Gerstle)

19 Kawaji Sato, vol. 2, p. 102.

20 Ujiie 1998.

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