

FEMININE PERCEPTIONS IN JAPANESE ART OF THE KINSEI ERA

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This paper explores the issue of gender distinctions in painting, artistic practice, and criticism during the Edo and early Meiji periods. While the majority of women accepted the traditional, male-defined concept of femininity, there were women like Ema Saikō who quietly defined their own style of “femininity” and anticipated the liberal attitudes and lifestyles of the modern era. Expressions of feminine sensibilities tend to be more apparent in the writings and activities of women artists than in their actual paintings, yet gender distinctions are sometimes visible in the choice of subjects and compositions. The discussion here focuses particularly on images of women by women.

Key words: JAPANESE WOMEN ARTISTS, IMAGES OF WOMEN, *BIJINGA*, GENDER DISTINCTIONS IN ART, EMA SAIKŌ.

It has been well established that by the Taishō period (1912-25), women’s perceptions about themselves and their roles in society were changing due to the growing emphasis on Western concepts of democracy and individual freedom. No longer bound by the traditional values and views of the old feudalistic society, women began to redefine their femininity, and their growing self-awareness as women is reflected in their poetry and art. Yosano Akiko (与謝野晶子) (1878-1942) became famous for her poems celebrating female sexuality, and some women painters showed an interest in painting more straightforward, humanized images of women instead of the idealized beauties of traditional *bijinga* (美人画).¹ An example is Kajiwara Hisako’s (梶原緋佐子) (1896-1988) painting of 1918 depicting a young waitress seated on a bench at a train station (Plate 1). The woman’s weary facial expression and slumped posture betray her exhaustion after a long day of work. Like other artists of her era, Hisako sought inspiration in life around her, not in ideals. Her goal was to portray real women and their psychological states as truthfully as possible. In addition, here she is clearly making a social statement about the plight of working-class woman. As Michiyo Morioka has noted, this kind of “anti-traditional” representation was an outgrowth of “Hisako’s perception of her own gender, broadened by self-awareness as a modern woman.”²

Even Hisako’s older female colleague Uemura Shōen (上村



Plate 1. Kajiwara Hisako, *Train Station in Early Evening*, 1918. Framed, ink and color on paper, 190.2 × 83.3 cm. Kyoto City Art Museum.

松園) (1875-1949), who held more conservative views and continued to paint idealized images of women in the modern era, had a feminist attitude toward her subject: “Even when depicting a geisha, I want to represent a woman with a will of her own and a sense of pride rather than simply pretty and bewitching.”³ Shōen further stated that she wanted “to express a sense of inner strength lodged within a woman, which cannot be violated by anything or anyone.”⁴ This attitude is exemplified in her painting of the *Courtesan Kiyu* (Plate 2) done in 1904. Kiyu was a late Edo-period courtesan who committed suicide in order to avoid “shaming” herself by entertaining a foreign customer in Yokohama. Shōen depicts the disheartened courtesan solemnly kneeling before her farewell message, preparing to pull forth a dagger. In addition to expressing a nationalistic spirit, for women Shōen’s painting embodies the message that they must be strong and maintain their dignity at all costs.⁵

Expressions of feminine sensibilities can also be found earlier in the writings and paintings by women artists of the Edo (1600-1868) and Meiji (1868-1912) periods, hinting at a gradual development in this direction. Women were not campaigning for equal rights in the Edo period, but there were many women who had successful careers as painters and who enjoyed a professional status equal to men. Moreover, there were countless “non-professional” women artists who painted, wrote calligraphy, or did needlework for personal enjoyment. These were all socially acceptable pursuits for women, who led more active and creative lives than official teachings would lead us to believe.

While there were hundreds of women producing art during the Edo period, feminine viewpoints are not overtly expressed in their artworks in the manner of Kajiwara Hisako, for reasons to be discussed below. However, women’s attitudes are sometimes revealed in their writings and activities. For example, the *bunjin* poet and painter Ema Saikō (江馬細香) (1787-1861) from Ōgaki wrote several verses disclosing her self-awareness as a woman. In one poem she commented on her lack of traditional femininity, writing that instead of “applying makeup and combing my hair, I chant poems and paint pictures.”⁶ Remaining single in order to devote herself to painting and poetry, Saikō boldly stated in another poem that “throughout my life I have chosen to disregard the ‘three obediences’ (referring to father, husband, and son).”⁷ She was fortunate in that she received financial support and encouragement from her family, especially her doting scholar-physician father Ema Ransai (江馬蘭齋) (1747-1838). To borrow Virginia Woolf’s (1882-1941) phrase, she had the luxury of “a room of one’s own”. This, together with freedom from childbearing and domestic responsibilities, allowed Saikō to mature fully as an artist. Writing poetry and painting filled in emotionally and took the place of raising a family. In



Plate 2. Uemura Shōen, *Courtesan Kiyu*, 1904. Hanging scroll, ink and color on silk. 140 × 72.7 cm. Private collection. From *Uemura Shōen*, Vol. 1 of *Gendai Nihon bijinga zenshū* (Shūeisha, 1977).

one poem she relates that there is no need to mourn not having children as her paintings will be her legacy.⁸

Saikō's unconventional femininity was applauded rather than criticized by her colleagues, as indicated in the following poem written by the monk Unge (雲華) (1783-1850) in 1814 commemorating her first visit to Kyoto:

This elegant, refined lady's brush has the spirit of the wind;
 A delicately scented fragrance is emitted from her green sleeves.
 One flourish of ink results in bamboo on a round fan;
 Untainted by cosmetics, she is unsurpassed.⁹

This suggests that Saikō was admired for her artistic skills rather than just her physical beauty. Her poet and painter friends seemed not to have been threatened or disturbed by the fact that she had interests beyond domesticity. Yet there is evidence that male poets had different expectations with regard to the style and content of poems by women. In his critiques of Saikō's *kanshi*, (漢詩) Rai San'yō (賴山陽) (1780-1832) kept encouraging her to employ more feminine vernacular. On one verse he commented: "This is wonderfully dynamic, but it does not employ feminine language. If it had been written by a man, it would be truly a masterpiece."¹⁰ San'yō seems to be implying that Saikō should employ the kinds of words and expressions ordinarily used by most women. He and other *kanshi* poets in Japan were followers of a trend initiated in China advocating the use of plain language to express feelings. San'yō felt that Saikō's wording was too dynamic for a woman at times, but in retrospect this is not surprising since most of her colleagues were men and she was undoubtedly influenced by their poetic styles. As Kado Reiko has pointed out, the persistent appearance of similar criticisms indicates that Saikō continued to express herself in the way she saw fit.¹¹

This raises the issue of what constituted "femininity" in the Edo period. Depending on their gender and background, people may have had differing conceptions. Virginia Woolf once wrote: "A woman's writing is always feminine; it cannot help being feminine: the only difficulty lies in defining what we mean by feminine."¹² Woolf also observed that "Different though the sexes are, they intermix. In every human being a vacillation from one sex to the other takes place, and often it is only the clothes that keep the male or female likeness, while underneath the sex is the very opposite of what it is above."¹³ In sum, women (as well as men) are not neatly categorizable human beings. Liza Carihfield Dalby maintains that there were two distinct feminine ideals in Edo-period Japan: "one applying to wives and the other to professional non-wives."¹⁴ Wives were expected to be sensible, frugal, obedient, faithful, and to devote themselves to raising children and taking care of their families. Courtesans embodied the more romantic side of femininity, i.e. they were beautiful, intelligent, artistically talented, and stimulating sexual partners. While these ideals may have been generally accepted by Edo-period men and women, there were women like Saikō whose conception of womanhood embraced much more than traditional notions of gentility. Saikō's "femininity" was clearly at odds with Rai San'yō's image of feminine poetic style, but since her poems express her feelings as a woman, they should be considered as "feminine" regardless of the language.

Perhaps due to this "gender gap," Saikō and other women with artistic interests sought the companionship of like-minded women. A major document showing the existence of a kind of solidarity among women artists is a handscroll with paintings and calligraphy by 22 women collected by Ema Saikō.¹⁵ Presumably she met them at gatherings and either requested or was

given the works. Many of the women were married to prominent poets and artists. That Saikō gathered so many works by women and had them mounted together without including works by men (which she also owned) was a way of calling attention to and celebrating female artistry of her day. It shows her self-awareness as a woman and feminist inclinations. Saikō herself apparently saw no need to link their identity with their spouses or fathers, but someone appended labels (the calligraphy is not the hand of Saikō) identifying the artists as the wives or daughters of so and so. This follows the format of traditional biographies, which usually define women in terms of the men in their lives, neglecting their creative persona and individuality.

Saikō's confidence in the abilities of her female colleagues is evidenced in a poem she presented to a woman named Tomioka Ginshō (富岡銀松) on the occasion of her 70th birthday. The proprietor of a dry goods store in Tsu, Ginshō was responsible for restoring the family business when it went into decline. Saikō makes reference to this in her poem, in which she wonders why people regard it as a man's duty to maintain the family when women can bear the burden equally well.¹⁶

While Saikō's feminist attitude comes forth occasionally in her poetry and through the activity of collecting works by women, it is less visible in her paintings. *Bunjin* (文人) circles emphasized the importance of personal expression, believing that a person's character would come forth naturally in his or her brushwork. I have found no evidence, however, to suggest that artists consciously considered expressing their gender in the manner of twentieth-century artists. The idea of constructing two separate gender categories — “man” and “woman” — is something that evolved in the West. As Timon Screech has pointed out, while gender certainly influenced Japanese people's perceptions about life, it was never the *primary* social division in Japan that it was in the West.¹⁷ Social class and background probably played far more important roles than gender in determining subject matter and styles in traditional Japan.

Japanese scholars sometimes employ terms translatable as “feminine” — *joseiteki* (女性的) and *josei rashii* (女性らしい) — when describing works by women artists. I have asked for a clarification of this “feminine” quality, but have only received ambiguous responses such as “the brushwork is gentle and soft.” In my own research I have not been able to find convincing evidence that women painters employed brush styles differing significantly from those used by men. Most women artists of the Kinsei era studied with male teachers, and following Japanese tradition, they modeled their works after their mentors'. Depending upon the school or tradition with which they were affiliated, women artists painted scenes from classical tales, Buddhist and Taoist deities, historical figures, courtesans, kabuki actors, portraits, as well as birds and flowers, landscapes, bamboo, plum blossoms, and so forth. Since they, like most male artists, did not feel the need to break away from the framework of established traditions and therefore adhered to standard formulas, personal/feminine expressions can be difficult to ascertain.

Yet conventional subjects must have had different nuances and meanings for men and women. An example is the theme of plum blossoms, which are generally regarded as symbols of strength and endurance since they come forth in the early spring amid the cold and snow. In Chinese literature plum blossoms were also employed to symbolize the passage of time and specifically the loss of youthful beauty in women.¹⁸ Female *bunjin* seem to have been aware of the feminine connotations of this subject, for among the numerous plum blossom paintings by Chō Kōran (張紅蘭) (1804-79) is one done at age 73 (Plate 3) with an inscription including the phrase: “Who can believe that this jade lady endures the frost (肯信瓊妃能耐霜)”. By using the plum as a

metaphor for herself, Kōran's painting becomes a kind of self portrait. Thus while not visible in the brushstrokes or composition, this painting can be said to express Kōran's feminine consciousness.

While I have not yet been able to confirm the existence of gender-specific styles within Edo-period painting, I have had some success at finding gender distinctions in choice of subject matter and composition. I have found no documentation that women were discouraged from doing any particular subject, but an analysis of extant works reveals that women clearly had preferences and were probably attracted to certain themes because of their gender. Feminine perceptions were expressed in subtle ways, as revealed in the following examples of female images.

Images of Women through the Eyes of Women

Among the extant works of Kiyohara Yukinobu (清原雪信) (1643-82) are numerous depictions of prominent women poets and historical figures such as Ono no Komachi, Murasaki Shikibu, Sei Shōnagon, and Ise Tayu.¹⁹ Although these female celebrities were also painted by male Kanō artists, the percentage in Yukinobu's oeuvre is unusually high within this school. An abundance of female subjects is also apparent in the work of the semi-professional woman artist Tadaoka Michiko (忠岡三千子) (ac. second half of 18th century).²⁰ This opting for female subject matter may be linked to the artists' gender. Women were familiar with female poets and historical figures through popular books such as the *Honchō kokon retsujo den* (本朝古今烈女伝) (Lives of Heroines in Ancient and Modern Times, 1668) and other literature read by women. Their choice may also reflect pride for talented members of their own sex. As illustrated in the following comparison, women artists' admiration for and identification with female subjects differed from men.

In her painting (Plate 4) of a well-known passage from the *Makura no sōshi* (枕の草子) (Pillow Book), in which Sei Shōnagon (清少納言) rolls up a bamboo blind to expose a snow-covered garden,²¹ Yukinobu presents a bird's-eye view of the building and its surrounding garden, with attention equally focused on the figures and the setting. Sei Shōnagon is depicted in profile; what is emphasized is the act of rolling up the blind, not the figure per se, suggesting that Yukinobu was primarily interested in conveying the narrative, especially the protagonist's clever response. Katsukawa Shunshō (勝川春章) (1726-92) presented a totally different view in his *mitate* (見立) of the same subject (Plate 5). A snow-covered pine tree and bamboo blinds are included to identify the scene, but the focus is on the figure of "Sei Shōnagon", who has been replaced by an elegant woman dressed in contemporary clothing. Both artists have lavished attention on the women's costumes; however, the slender form of Shunshō's figure, depicted from much closer range, is revealed to the viewer rather than obscured by multiple layers of court robes. Moreover, her face is described in greater detail, drawing viewers' attention to her physical beauty. In sum, Shunshō's aim was not so much to tell the story as to portray a beautiful



Plate 3. Chō Kōran, *Plum Blossoms*, 1876. Hanging scroll, ink on paper. 134.9 × 47.6 cm. Private collection.



Plate 4. Kiyohara Yukinobu, *Sei Shōnagon*. Hanging scroll, ink and color on silk.
43 × 57.5 cm. The Shin'enkan Collection.

woman, with the allusions to the *Makura no sōshi* adding an element of wit. Like other ukiyo-e artists he was designing prints to appeal to a largely male audience.

To some extent the variations in compositions can be explained by the fact that the artists were working in different artistic traditions and eras: the conservative Kanō school in the seventeenth century versus the more fashionable and worldly ukiyo-e school in the eighteenth century. But I would like to suggest that certain choices made by the artists may have been colored by their gender, as well as the gender of their patrons. Women were fond of reading literature by women. Saikō even made references to this practice in her poetry.²² It would seem natural therefore that women would enjoy looking at as well as painting female literary and historical figures. There is an album by Yukinobu depicting 36 famous women poets that Narazaki Muneshige believes may have been created for the trousseau of a daimyo's wife.²³

An interesting subject to consider with regard to gender is courtesans. Since men were the primary patrons as well as creators, courtesans were typically portrayed from the male point of view, i.e. as aesthetic objects of beauty with erotic overtones. However, there are numerous paintings of courtesans by women. Did they paint this subject at the behest of patrons, or because they were personally interested in the beauties of the demimonde? In the cases of daughters of ukiyo-e artists, whose artistic production was linked to the family vocation, representations of courtesans were probably done to satisfy the market. However, for women of a higher social status who presumably painted for pleasure such as Yamazaki Ryūjo (山崎龍女) (ac. first half of 18th century), the daughter of a shogunal vassal, and Tadaoka Michiko, who served as lady-in-waiting to the wife of the Sendai daimyo, concentration on this subject may well have been a conscious choice.

In their paintings of courtesans, did Ryūjo and Michiko introduce a feminine point of view or



Plate 5. Katsukawa Shunshō, *Snow*. Hanging scroll, ink and color on silk.
93 × 32.3 cm. MOA Museum of Art.

comply (unconsciously) with the male tastes that had defined the standard ukiyo-e repertoire? Praised for their beauty and seductive charm, high-ranking courtesans were glamorized in popular novels. For both men and women they represented a feminine ideal. However, an analysis of courtesan paintings by both sexes reveals that for many women the feminine ideal comprised more than just physical beauty. Although women artists generally relied upon male-defined compositional designs, in painting courtesans they made choices which subtly reflect their feminine perceptions.

In contrast to male ukiyo-e artists who painted the whole range of women of the floating world, Ryūjo and other women artists, regardless of class, did not paint lowly prostitutes, but courtesans of the upper ranks. The two types were clearly distinguished in the opening pages of the *E-iri nichiyō onna chōhō-ki* (絵入日用女重宝記) (Illustrated Handbook for Women, 1847) depicting women from various walks of life.²⁴ The figures are labeled as follows: townswoman, samurai woman, court woman, peasant woman, concubine, courtesan, prostitute, and widow. Because courtesans were often skilled in traditional poetry, painting, music, and dance, they were not thought of simply as sexual commodities.

Ryūjo's courtesans tend to adopt more pensive, rather than provocative, poses. The underlying tone of her painting of a woman with an umbrella (Plate 6) is quite different from Toyogawa Eishin's (豊川栄深) (Plate 7), who uses the excuse of a snowstorm to blow away the robes and expose his subject's legs. While the edge of the garment worn by Ryūjo's woman is blown upward, her legs remain completely covered. Further evidence of Ryūjo's differing conception can be found in the poem she inscribed above the painting:

Yo o sutete	By renouncing the world,
Mi wa nakimono to	Although one thinks
Omoetomo	The body is extinguished,
Yuki no furu ya wa	A snowy night
Samu koso are	Is indeed cold.

On first reading, the poem may seem to refer to a courtesan's realization that although she has



Plate 6. Yamazaki Ryūjo, *Woman with an Umbrella*. Hanging scroll, ink and color on paper. 121 × 35.5 cm. MOA Museum of Art.



Plate 7. Toyogawa Eishin, *Beauty in the Snow*. Hanging scroll, ink and color on silk. 56.1 × 30.1 cm. Private collection.

resigned herself to fate and given up attachments to her body, life is not always blissful. However, the poem more likely reflects Ryūjo's musings about herself. Further evidence is the *waka* she inscribed on a painting of a courtesan preparing to take a bath.²⁵

Miru hito mo	No one sees
Nakute chirinuru	The falling maple leaves
Okuyama no	Deep in the mountains,
Momiji wa yoru no	Where they become
Kin narikeri	Nocturnal "brocade".

The maple leaves would seem to be a metaphor for the woman in the painting, bespeaking a loneliness — a longing for attention and love. It is unclear whether or not these verses are Ryūjo's own creations, but if not, she probably chose them because they accorded with her own sentiments. If the poems convey Ryūjo's feelings, then the women in her paintings, too, can be viewed as reflections of an ideal. Ryūjo was not a courtesan and probably had no desire to be one, but these images served as vehicles to express her romantic conception of women as paragons of beauty. By adding insightful poetic inscriptions, Ryūjo expands the feminine ideal to include human emotions. In contrast, Eishin and other male ukiyo-e artists tend to emphasize the erotic nature of the female body, undoubtedly to make their pictures more attractive to male customers.

This is not to say that women never did erotic paintings, or that they were rejecting sensuality. Women, like men are not one-dimensional and it is impossible to accurately generalize about their attitudes toward the depiction of sexual themes. The female ukiyo-e artist Katsura Miki (桂三木) (ac. late 18th-19th century), for example, is recorded as having done *shunga* (春画). There were probably others, but our investigation is hampered by the lack of signatures on *shunga*. The point I wish to make here is that in paintings of courtesans by women, usually it is not sexuality that is emphasized, but rather beauty and romance. Women did not portray courtesans as seducers. Breasts, shoulders, and thighs are rarely exposed, nor women shown with paper tissue in their mouths. The traditional upbringing of women artists of the upper classes, in which modesty was regarded as a feminine virtue, may explain their reluctance to expose portions of the body to the "male gaze".

Further evidence that women painters were inclined to highlight their subjects' intellects and talents more than their sexuality are the collaborative paintings by the sisters Nagahara Baien (長原梅園) (d. 1898) and Hirai Renzan (平井連山) (1798-1886), which often depict courtesans with musical instruments (Plate 8). In addition to reflecting the two women's own musical interests (both were skilled performers of a kind of Chinese music called *shingaku* (清樂)), their paintings demonstrate that from the female point of view, the feminine ideal was one of creativity as well as physical beauty.

Male artists also designed woodblock prints and paintings showing courtesans or other women engaged in cultural pursuits, suggesting that men admired women with talent as well. But as suggested by the following comparison, the perceptions underlying such works may differ according to the artists' gender. Moreover, the high percentage of this subject matter within the oeuvres of some women artists indicates that this was an important aspect of their feminine ideal.

Among the female *bunjin* Noguchi Shōhin's (野口小蘋) (1847-1917) works is a scroll reminiscent of paintings of Chinese literati absorbed in music, poetry, calligraphy, and painting (J: *kinkishoga* (琴棋書画)), but the figures are all women instead of men (Plate 9). Male artists



Plate 8. Hirai Renzan and Nagahara Baien, *Woman with a One-stringed Ch'in*. Hanging scroll, ink and color on silk. 88.3 × 31.8 cm. John and Celeste Fleming Collection. Photograph courtesy of the Denver Art Museum.



Plate 9. Noguchi Shōhin, *Women in a Garden*. Hanging scroll, ink and color on silk. 11.5 × 37 cm. Private collection. Photograph courtesy of the Yamanashi Prefectural Museum of Art.

occasionally painted this subject as a kind of *mitate*, but in their versions women tend to be represented as doll-like figures and treated as decorative elements in an overall design.²⁶ A more conspicuously male viewpoint is introduced by Utagawa Toyoharu (歌川豊春) (1735-1814) in his woodblock print where the activity of women practicing calligraphy becomes a diversion for a male spectator (Plate 10). I would like to suggest that Shōhin's conception was a genuine



Plate 10. Utagawa Toyoharu, *The Four Accomplishments: Calligraphy*. Nishikie woodblock print. 48.2 × 34 cm. Museo d'Arte Orientale, Genoa.

celebration of feminine talents rather than just a takeoff on a traditional theme. The figures are dispersed naturally in a garden setting and Shōhin has emphasized their humanity by showing them interacting amid their diverse activities. While their faces are almost identical (not individualized, but idealized types), women of different ages and social status are distinguished by their costumes.

This scroll was painted for Tani Tesshin (谷鉄臣) (1822-1905), a Hikone samurai famous for his poetry and calligraphy. Shōhin recorded this fact in her box inscription added 39 years later, at which time she also inscribed the box lid with the title “Sesshoku bijin gashū (設色美人画集) zu” (Colorful Elegant Gathering of Beautiful Women). While the term *bijinga* was coined during the Meiji period, paintings of beautiful women had already become an established category of Japanese art in the Edo period. Shōhin and other women artists seem not to have questioned the fact that this genre of painting, as well as many of their

own notions of womanhood, were shaped by male ideology. Later, in response to the growing humanistic sentiment and social changes in the Taishō period, *bijinga* came under attack as being outmoded.²⁷ While there was no tradition of women doing “women’s art” in the Edo period, as illustrated in the above examples, women could not help but look at women with different eyes, and their perceptions are subtly reflected in their portrayals of conventional female subjects.

It is perhaps in illustrations to diaries, where women depicted people and events drawn from their own lives rather than standard subjects, that a feminine viewpoint is most directly expressed. Examples are the illustrations accompanying the diary of Yamada Otowako (山田音羽子) (1795-1877), who was married to a samurai living in Yamagata. Like many women from educated families, she took up painting as a hobby, concentrating primarily on figure paintings. Of special interest is Otowako’s diary recording the move (mandated by the shogunate) of her family in 1845 along with all of the retainers of the daimyo of the Yamagata domain to Tatebayashi in Joshū (present-day Kōzuke). Her ink drawings stylistically follow the tradition of illustrated books, suggesting that she was self-taught. But while her style is conventional and the figures conform to universal types, the scenes and activities she depicts in her diary are very personal — not copied from books but born from her own experiences.

Otowako included some views of the entourage winding its way through the countryside, but most of her illustrations document the domestic sphere with which she was most familiar, and consequently are dominated by women and children. (At the time of the move Otowako was the

Plate 11a-f. Yamada Otowako, *Illustrations from the Okunigae Diary*. Ink on paper. Yamada Collection.



Plate 11a



Plate 11b

mother of eight and a grandmother.) In the section recounting preparations for the journey, Otowako represents herself meeting with two women who have come to purchase the family's household goods (Plate 11a) and making a farewell visit to the Yamada family graves (11b). She was forced to slightly delay her departure when she and her youngest son caught colds; mother and child are shown resting under a futon, surrounded by family members (11c). In addition to



Plate 11c

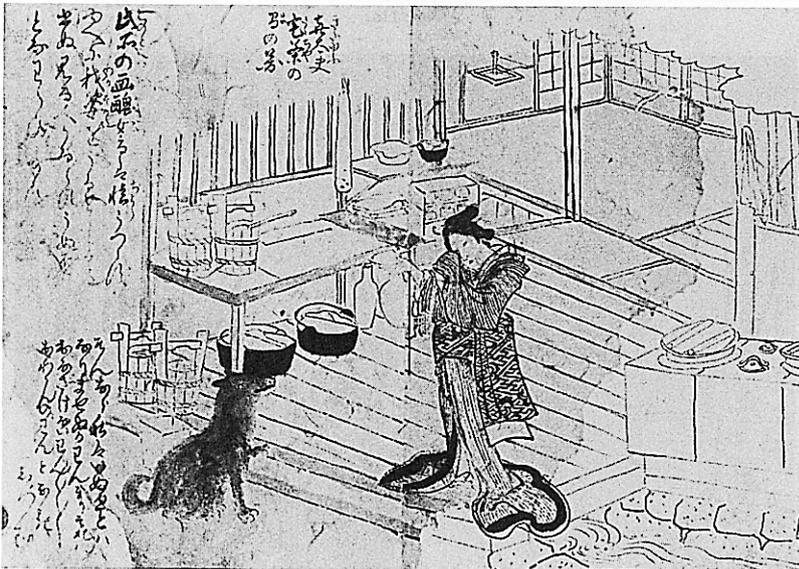


Plate 11d

children, pets were regarded as important by women. Otowako depicts the tearful separation from her pet dog (11d) and later, herself attempting to feed a sick rabbit that was captured during the journey (11e).

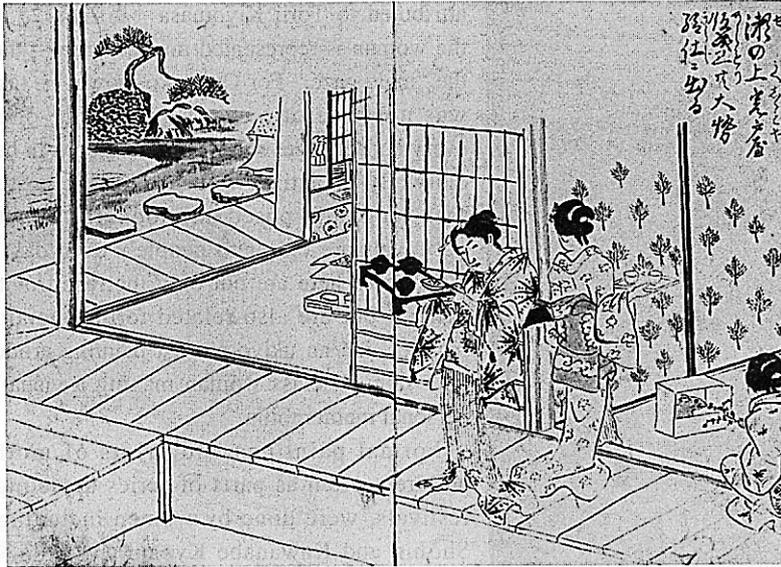


Plate 11e

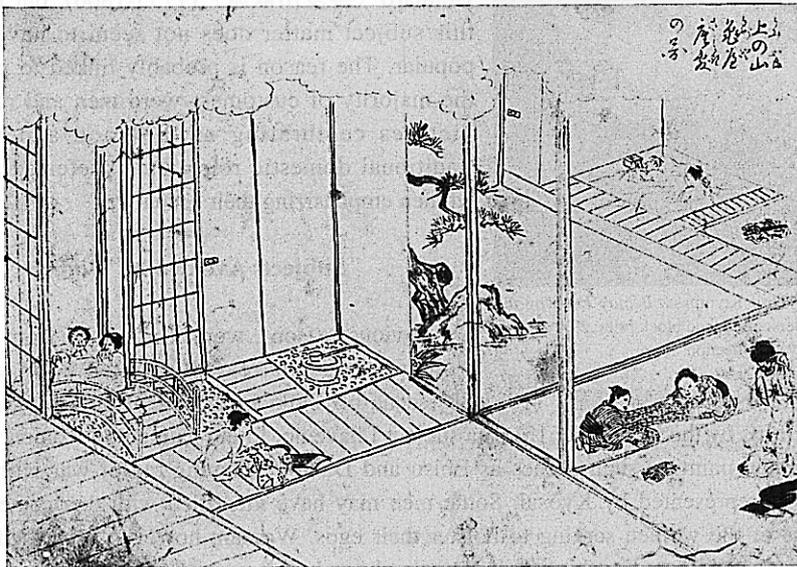


Plate 11f

These fresh, intimate portrayals of daily life reveal a great deal about women and their concerns. Rather than glamorizing them, Otowako has portrayed women in a humanized, straightforward fashion. Of course the figures are not individualized or represented as naturalistically as in Kajiwara Hisako's work of the Taishō era, but they represent real people taking part in activities that actually took place. In Otowako's depiction of women taking a bath at an inn (Plate 11f), the figures are rather tiny and part of a larger picture with other activities taking place simultaneously. In a typical bathing scene in ukiyo-e, here represented by a print



Plate 12. Attr. Torii Kiyomasa, *Beauty Entering the Bath*. Benizurie wood block print. 29.4 × 13.6 cm. Private collection.

attributed to Torii Kiyomasa (鳥居清政) (Plate 12), the woman is represented much larger — the object of the “male gaze.” For Otowako, however, taking a bath was not an erotic event but simply one of many everyday activities she wished to record in her personal diary. By depicting women in active postures rather than languidly posed and looking “beautiful”, her portrayals are closer to people’s everyday lives. The differences here are not only the result of the artists’ gender, but are also related to the functions of the pictures, i.e. an ukiyo-e artist painting erotica for sale vs a samurai-class woman making a visual record as personal memorabilia.

Formal paintings and prints of mothers with children, often as parts of series depicting seasonal festivals, were done by women including Noguchi Shōhin and Kawanabe Kyōsui (河鍋曉翠) (1868-1935), as well as by male artists such as Kitagawa Utamaro (喜多川歌麿) (1753-1806), but ultimately this subject matter does not seem to have been so popular. The reason is probably linked to patronage; the majority of customers were men and rather than pictures celebrating motherhood and women’s traditional domestic roles, they preferred scenes of women emphasizing their sexuality.

Subjects Avoided by Women

For obvious reasons, women refrained from depicting women being mistreated or acted upon violently.

Kawanabe Kyōsai’s (河鍋曉齋) (1831-89) scene of Shōki in the act of punishing a woman, whom he grasps by the hair (Plate 13), is a subject I have not found painted by women. Nor have I found women painting such scenes as Ebisu and Daikoku playing tug-of-war with Otafuku (Plate 14), as represented by Kyōsai. Some men may have identified with the tormentors, the helplessness of the women serving to bolster their egos. Women, however, identified with the women being acted upon. For this reason, female ghosts by women artists are also rare. Men may have found something hauntingly beautiful about the apparitions of tormented heroines, but women probably did not want to be reminded of the suffering women experienced as a result of human cruelty and repression. Ghosts were often driven by jealousy and spite — negative traits which were not part of the feminine ideal that women wished to emulate. Uemura Shōen did only one painting in this genre — the ghost of Lady Rokujō from the *Tale of Genji*.²⁸ However, afterward she regretted it, saying: “Later I wondered myself why I had painted such a horrifying image. I was experiencing a severe slump in my art at the time. I think I transmitted my frustration into that particular subject and directed all my feeling to it.”²⁹ Male artists may have

painted this subject in response to patrons' requests, but since the majority of women artists were not professionals, they did not have to cater to public demand.

Gender Distinctions in Artistic Practice

If not always visible in their paintings, was there a feminine conception of what artistic practice should be in pre-modern Japan? There are cases of exceptional women who pursued full-time careers in artistic workshops; however, most women cultivated arts that could be practiced in the home, for their roles as wives, mothers, and daughters in Japan's patriarchal society bound them to the domestic sphere for much of their

lives. Amateur painting was practiced by a broad segment of Japanese society during the Edo period, due to a diffusion of Chinese literati ideals. It was viewed along with poetry and calligraphy as one of the accomplishments of cultivated individuals. Practitioners included men and women at court, as well as those belonging to samurai, merchant, and artisan families.

Marsha Weidner has pointed out that the predominance of literati culture and the status accorded to amateur painting in China made it possible for Chinese women to develop artistic skills and to gain recognition.³⁰ If professional workshops had been the only places where they could acquire artistic training, opportunities for women in both China and Japan would have been extremely limited, as gender restricted their mobility. The fact that so many women turned to art proves that the creative impulse was there. In that respect they were no different than men.

Human personalities are diverse, and therefore one cannot rigidly define a feminine (or masculine) conception of artistic practice. For many women, art was a diversion, something practiced in their leisure time. For others, it was more of a disciplined study. It can generally be stated that the majority of women did not paint out of economic necessity, although there are numerous cases in which the sale or exchange of works supplemented family incomes. The female *bunjin* Kamei Shōkin (亀井少莱) (1798-1857) wrote in a letter that "Calligraphy and



Plate 13. Kawanabe Kyōsai, *Shōki Punishing a Woman*. Hanging scroll, ink and color on silk. 81 × 32.5 cm. Kawanabe Kyōsai Memorial Museum.



Plate 14. Kawanabe Kyōsai, *Three Gods of Good Fortune*. Hanging scroll, ink and light color on paper. 134.5 × 61.6 cm. Private collection. From *Kawanabe Kyōsai ten* (Ibaragi Prefectural Museum of Modern Art, 1989).

painting, more than anything, make one forget one's cares," indicating that art functioned as a way of nurturing her spirit.³¹ A similar sentiment was expressed by Ōtagaki Rengetsu (大田垣蓮月) (1791-1875) in the following *waka*:

Nanigoto mo	Taking up the brush
Nasu to wa nashi ni	Just for the joy of it,
Tawamure ni	Writing on and on,
Kakinokoshitaru	Leaving behind
Mizuguki no ato	Long lines of dancing letters.

(Translated by John Stevens)³²

Perhaps even more so than for men, who had more physical freedom, art functioned as a kind of release for women.

Since most women painted for pleasure rather than as a profession, theoretically they had more freedom than men to paint what they wanted. However, it is the Japanese system to comply, and women like men were trained to express themselves in conventional terms. The examples discussed above were selected because they have features demonstrating that women perceived the world differently than men. It should be pointed out that in the majority of paintings, however, gender distinctions are not readily discernible. As noted previously, gender was not the issue in Edo-period Japan that it has become in the twentieth century, and women did not yet feel compelled to develop a separate aesthetic.

Gender Distinctions in Criticism

Appended to the end of the first volume of Saikō's poetry collection, the *Shōmu ikō* (湘夢遺稿) (1870), is the following statement by Nomura Akira (野村煥) (1827-99): "It is unheard of for women to have this kind of [mastery] of history. Most famous men of this generation would not understand this."³³ While acknowledging Saikō's talent, these comments suggest that the expectation that one had to be male to create a masterpiece prevailed in Japan as it did in the West. Women artists may have had to struggle with a similar ideology, in which a form of backhanded praise was that their works could be mistaken for a man's. In the biography of Sakurai Seppō (桜井雪保) (1754?-1824) included in the *Gajō yōryaku* (画乘要略) (1831), her brushwork is described as having the power and vigor of a person with mustache and beard, i.e. a man. If the attitude of the "male genius" did prevail, it is no wonder that some creative women may have wanted to cast off their female identity. A few women including Seppō and Okuhara Seiko (奥原晴湖) (1837-1913) chose not to include the characters "Joshi" (女史) in their signatures, which was the customary practice of female painters. Since they both painted for a living, not just as a hobby, perhaps they refrained from openly declaring their gender because they wished to be viewed on equal terms with men. Seiko even went as far as to wear men's clothing and to cut her hair short. Her rejection of traditional feminine demeanor and customs may have been her way of renouncing the gender-segregated world, which perhaps she saw as an obstruction to her desire to pursue a career as a painter. Seiko may also have wanted to avoid the "bijin dilemma", i.e. to be regarded more as "a pretty face" than a serious artist. The two following excerpts from biographies of Tani Kankan (谷幹々) (1770-99) and Ema Saikō exemplify this attitude toward women, which has prevailed in much twentieth-century Japanese scholarship.

...the vigorous brushwork makes it hard to conceive that it was painted by a woman. She was a *bijin*, intelligent, a woman having both wit and beauty...³⁴

Saikō was not a homely woman but she liked to study...She was of medium build and height, perhaps a little on the tall side. Her face was neither round nor long, and it can be said that she was a *bijin*.³⁵

References to a woman's beauty were probably interjected as compliments, but since remarks about physical appearances are generally absent in biographies of male artists, it is obvious that women artists were judged by standards differently than men.

Moreover, in some compendiums, following Chinese custom, women were even segregated and included in a section labeled *keishū*. *Keishū* (閨秀) is defined as "a woman who excels in the arts";³⁶ *kei* denotes a "woman's sleeping quarters", and by extension, "woman."³⁷ This term, associating women artists with home and bedroom clearly originated from a male point of view. While it may have been used unconsciously (as it often is today) without intended negative connotations, the existence of this term implies that society may have made gender distinctions with regard to their practice, particularly the idea that painting was acceptable if practiced privately in the home without upsetting traditional domestic roles.

Summary

There is no question that women's perceptions of themselves were influenced by Japan's patriarchal society, and that the majority of Kinsei-era women accepted the traditional, male-constructed concept of femininity in which the ideal woman was beautiful, gentle, and virtuous. Yet there were women like Ema Saikō who quietly defined their own style of "femininity", anticipating the liberal attitudes and lifestyles of the modern era. In the above examples, we have seen how women artists of the Edo and early Meiji periods expanded the traditional feminine ideal to include emotions, intelligence, artistic talent, and everyday domestic activities. Their gender identification with female imagery is reflected in their "woman centered" presentations, which are often desensualized and depicted with more integrity. These gender distinctions are often subtle and the artists themselves may not have been consciously making them. Yet even in an age when male ideals reigned, women could not help but be women.

I am indebted to Paul Berry, Gunhild Borggreen, and Mary Dusenbury for their critical reading of the manuscript and for their helpful suggestions.

NOTES

- 1 For an excellent study of Taishō women painters and their attitudes toward female imagery, see Michiyo Morioka, *Changing Images of Women: Taishō Period Paintings by Uemura Shōen (1875-1949), Itō Shōha (1877-1968), and Kajiwara Hisako (1896-1988)* (University of Washington Doctoral Dissertation, 1990).
- 2 *Ibid.*, 223.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 67-68. Quoted from Shōen, *Seibisho* (Tokyo: Sansaisha, 1972), 112.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 82. Quoted from Shōen, *Seibisho*, 111.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 66.
- 6 Kado Reiko and Iriya Sensuke, *Ema Saikō shishū* [Shōmu ikō] (Tokyo Kyūko Shoin, 1992), Vol. 2, 22-23.

- 7 Ibid., Vol. 1, 242.
- 8 Ibid., Vol. 1, 240-241.
- 9 For this poem and others by Unge, see Akamatsu Bunjiro, ed., *Unge Shōnin ikō* (Nakatsu: Gochokaku, 1933).
- 10 Kado Reiko, "Joryū shijin Ema Saikō oboe sho," *Edo ki onna ko*, Vol. 1 (1990), 44.
- 11 Ibid., 45.
- 12 From Virginia Woolf, "Women Novelists," in *Virginia Woolf: Women and Writing*, ed. Michele Barrett (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), 70. Quoted from Pamela L. Caughie, "'I must not settle into a figure': The Woman Artist in Virginia Woolf's Writings," in *Writing the Woman Artist*, ed. Suzanne W. Jones (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 371.
- 13 From Virginia Woolf, *Orlando* (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1928, rpt. 1956), 189. Quoted from Caughie, op. cit., 387.
- 14 Liza Crihfield Dalby, "Courtesan and Geisha: The Real Women of the Pleasure Quarter," in *The Women of the Pleasure Quarter* (NY: Hudson Hills Press, 1995), 55.
- 15 Ema Collection, Ōgaki.
- 16 Kado and Iriya, *Ema Saikō shishū*, Vol. 2, 317-319.
- 17 See Timon Screech, "Race and Gender? Human Categorisation in Japan," in *Disrupted Borders*, ed. by Sunil Gupta (London: Rivers Oram Press, 1993), 133-143. I am grateful to Gunhild Borggreen for calling my attention to this article.
- 18 See Maggie Bickford, *Bones of Jade, Soul of Ice* (New Haven, CN: Yale University Art Gallery, 1985).
- 19 For illustrations of Yukinobu's work, see Fister, *Japanese Women Artists, 1600-1900* (Lawrence, KS: Spencer Museum of Art, 1988) and *Kinsei no josei gakatachi* (Kyoto: Shibunkaku, 1994); Yasumura Toshinobu, *Edo no keishū gaka ten zuroku* (Tokyo: Itabashi Kuritsu Bijutsukan, 1991).
- 20 For illustrations see Sendai Shi Hakubutsukan, *Sendai han no kaiga* (Sendai, 1993) and Yasumura, *Edo no keishū gaka ten zuroku*.
- 21 See Ivan Morris, *The Pillow Book of Sei Shōnagon* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), 241-242.
- 22 See, for example, her poem entitled "Beneath the Lamp, Reading Poems by Women". Kado and Iriya, *Ema Saikō shishū*, Vol. 1, 37.
- 23 Narazaki Muneshige, "Kiyohara Yukinobu hitsu: Nyōbo sanjūrokkasen zu," *Kokka*, No. 712 (July 1951), 255.
- 24 For an illustration, see Fister, *Japanese Women Artists*, 134.
- 25 Collection of Nihon Ukiyo-e Hakubutsukan.
- 26 See for example the screens by an anonymous artist published in *Nikuhitsu ukiyo-e*, Vol. 4, *Shunshō* (Tokyo: Shūeisha, 1982), No. 56.
- 27 Morioka, *Changing Images of Women*, 3.
- 28 Collection of Tokyo National Museum. For a reproduction, see *Gendai Nihon bijinga zenshū*, Vol. 12, pl. 14 (Tokyo: Shūeisha, 1977).
- 29 Morioka, *Changing Images of Women*, 190. Translated from Shōen, *Seibisho*, 109-110.
- 30 Marsha Weidner, "Women in the History of Chinese Painting," *Views from Jade Terrace: Chinese Women Artists 1300-1912* (Indianapolis Museum of Art, 1988), 13.
- 31 For the text of the letter see Shono Hisahito, *Edo koki Chikuzen keishū ten* (Fukuoka: Kayo Bunko/Noko Hakubutsukan, 1992), 88.
- 32 From John Stevens, *Lotus Moon: The Poetry of the Buddhist Nun Rengetsu* (NY: Weatherhill, Inc., 1994).
- 33 Kado and Iriya, *Ema Saikō shishū*, Vol. 2, 564.
- 34 Excerpted from Satake Eiryō, "Bunchō fujin Kankan Joshi," *Toei*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (1936), 19.
- 35 Excerpted from *Ruishu denki dai Nihon shi*, Vol. 15, *Josei hen* (Tokyo, 1981), 205.
- 36 Shinmura Izuru, ed., *Kojien*, Fourth Reprinting (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1993), 789.
- 37 Morohashi T, *Dai kanwa jiten*, Vol. 11, 741-742 (Tokyo: Daishukan Shoten, 1984).

近世日本美術における女性的感性

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要旨：江戸・明治初期の絵画と芸術的概念及びその実践、また批評の問題をジェンダー論の視点から論じる。多くの女性たちが男性にのみ定義された伝統的なフェミニティの概念を容認したが、江馬細香のように芸術家が静かに自らの女性特有のスタイルを育て、近代的で自由闊達な態度とライフスタイルの形成を先駆けた。女性的な感性は女性画家たちの描いた作品よりも彼女らの文章や女性作家の作品の収集などに表われている。しかし、ときには題材や構図の選択によってジェンダーも可能であり、本論では特に女性たちの描いた女性像について論考する。