

INTRODUCTION

In February 2008, I received an email out of the blue from a prominent Spanish media organization asking me for information on *shunga*, Japanese erotic art of the seventeenth–nineteenth centuries. Their plan was to create a documentary and distribute it as a DVD to the Spanish-speaking world. The theme was to be about the traditional lifestyles of countries around the world and distributed via their news organization. They were gathering information and interviews from a wide range of specialists—Spanish anthropologists, philosophers, religious scholars, natural scientists, and literature scholars—and wanted to include Japanese *shunga* in the section on sexual life and customs.

The reason this email came to my desk was most likely because of the fact that the International Research Center for Japanese Studies in Kyoto has a large collection of *shunga* and *shunga* books, and all of these are available publicly on the Center’s online database, and it is known that I am in charge of this collection. In fact, the Center’s “Enpon (Ukiyo-e Erotic Books) Database” has now more than 550 titles and more than 11,000 images, and I believe it to be the single most important public database of *shunga* in the world in terms of quantity and quality. And as one might expect, the Spanish media company wanted to photograph high quality *shunga*.

However, when preparing the *shunga* exhibition at the Helsinki City Museum in Finland ten years ago, I found that Westerners have many mistaken ideas and prejudices about *shunga* and I wanted to take the opportunity of the Spanish visit to speak to them about the characteristics of *shunga*. They were happy to follow my suggestion and on the day they came, we spent about three hours looking at examples of the monochrome works of Hishikawa Moronobu (founder of ukiyo-e; d. 1694), the full-color works of Suzuki Harunobu (1725?–1770), the first to exploit color, Kitagawa Utamaro (1753–1806), Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849), and Utagawa Kunisada (1786–1864), while I spoke to them through the interpretation of a Spanish student from Tokyo University of the Arts. I answered the questions of the director as we viewed the works.

The director began by saying that he had lots of questions and among them was about the connection he thought that there was between “*shunga* and contemporary *hentai* [pervert or fetish] manga comics.” While responding to his questions, I recalled the reactions of others at the Helsinki exhibition and the Western book on *shunga* that had the theme of “*shunga* was for male masturbation.” There are some common elements among these various individual perceptions. I realized that in the West, *shunga* was understood only through a shallow view of the image alone, and based on certain prejudices.

This attitude, however, was not the fault of the Westerners. From the time of modernization under the Meiji government, the Japanese themselves have come to reject

shunga as an embarrassment, to the point that until recently it was taboo to research this in the academies. It is certainly not only non-Japanese who have misunderstandings and prejudices about *shunga*. It is also true among the Japanese today. I have now been researching *shunga* for more than twenty years, but before then I was totally ignorant about *shunga*.

Until recently when one heard anything about *shunga* in Japan, the works were usually described as shameless, audacious, blatant sexual representations with exaggerated penises. However, when one looks at the variety of *shunga*, its characteristics are certainly not limited in this way. We find a tremendously wide range of expression. The aim of this book is to answer the many questions that I have had from Japanese and non-Japanese about *shunga* in order to introduce its salient characteristics afresh.