

I. HISTORY OF *SHUNGA*

Question 1. In the West, when someone says, “Oh, Utamaro!” they are referring to a phallus, but was the exaggerated size of the penis a characteristic of ukiyo-e *shunga*?

A. It is certainly true that ukiyo-e artists were prolific in the production of *shunga*, but records show that the exaggerated representation of genitals in sexually explicit art goes back long before the Edo period (1600–1868) to the Heian period (794–1192).

For example a mid-thirteenth century collection of anecdotes, *Kokon chomonjū* (A Collection of Tales Written and Heard in Ancient and Modern Times) relates an episode about the famous painter-monk Toba Sōjō (Kakuyū, 1053–1140). Toba Sōjō criticizes his pupil’s exaggerated representation of a fighting scene. The quotation below is the pupil’s response:

No, that’s not right. Look at those erotic paintings (*osoku-zu*) made by old masters. They depict the size of “the thing” (*sono mono*) far too large. How could it actually be like that? If it were depicted in its actual size, there would be nothing of interest. For that very reason, don’t we say “art is fantasy” (*e-sora-goto*)? This kind of representation is in fact often found in your work, isn’t it, Master?

Toba Sōjō had no reply to this.

In reading this anecdote, we can see that already in the Heian period there were erotic paintings. Moreover, interestingly it seems that painting masters also created *shunga*, and that even by that time the practice of exaggerating the genitals existed.

In the Edo-period *shunga* book *Hana ikada* (Clusters of Flowers by a Stream) Hanagasa Bunkyō (1785–1860) referred to *shunga* as “*kachi-e*.” According to him in ancient times courtiers hosted “picture competitions” (*e-awase*) and one time a *shunga* painting won (*katsu*) and after that *shunga* were also known as “victory pictures” (*kachi-e*). We can see that in classical times *shunga* was appreciated by courtiers and monks.

Unfortunately, however, no *shunga* from the Heian era survive, but we have faithful copies of several works that are thought to originally date from the late Heian and Kamakura eras (late twelfth to fourteenth centuries). Among these are *Koshibagaki zōshi*, *Chigo no sōshi*, and *Fukuro hōshi ekotoba*, which are erotic tales with explicit images and including textual narratives. The early *emaki* picture handscrolls are precious examples of early *shunga*.

1. *Koshibagaki zōshi* 小柴垣草紙 (Tale of the Brushwood Fence) (copy; details)
Text attributed to Emperor Goshirakawa (1127–1192); artist unknown. Color on paper.
13th century?

The subject of this handscroll is based on a recorded incident in 986 at the imperial court. The scandal involved Saishinai Shin'ō, the daughter of an emperor who was to serve at the imperial shrine at Ise. The convention was for the woman to purify herself for a year at the Nonomiya Shrine in Kyoto. A handsome young warrior Taira no Munemitsu attended her as an imperial guard. The pair, however, had a passionate affair. The scroll depicts their torrid relationship at the shrine in text and image.



Figure 1-1



Figure 1-2

2. *Chigo no sōshi* 稚児之草紙 (Tale of Acolytes) (copy; details)

Artist and author unknown. Color on paper. 13th century?

This is a narrative of sexual relations between various priests of a Kyoto temple and young acolytes who serve them. The acolytes are portrayed with long hair and fair skin like women and are presented as gentle and warm-hearted. The monks fawn over these young men exposing their petty desires. We see the raw natures of the priests as both pitiful and humorous.



Figure 2-1



Figure 2-2

3. *Fukuro hōshi ekotoba* 袋法師絵詞 (Priest in the Bag) (copy; details)

Artist and author unknown. Color on paper. 14th century (original).

Three ladies maids (*jijo*) get lost on a journey and are tempted by a priest, but the three women trick him and put him into a bag. He is taken to a nunnery where he is “food” for the many women, and eventually begins to waste away, exhausted. The tale is somewhat didactic: the point is that the priest intended to take advantage of the women, but in the end, he is tricked and used for the pleasure of the women, transforming the tale into a farce. Other *shunga* paintings were most likely composed after these, but we do not have surviving examples until the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

Handscrolls from this period are not in the same format of narrative stories as the earlier paintings; they do not have an overall uniting theme and show sex scenes each independent from the others. Moreover, these examples often depict courtiers, samurai, townsmen, and farmers—a wide variety of men and women copulating. They focus on the individuals themselves with minimal background, creating a kind of what we might call “sexual utopian space” or a carnal pleasure garden.

In these paintings there usually seems to be no theme other than variety, which is presented in what became a conventional twelve scenes. These handscroll or album sets of paintings were of course not produced in as great numbers as printed works, but production continued throughout the Edo period and into the modern era, including paintings by many famous artists.

We can get a sense of how widespread *shunga* painting was from the publication in 1721 of *Gasen* (Basket of Pictures) by Hayashi Moriatsu (d.u.), a painter in the Kano school, who were the official artists for the Tokugawa shogunate. This is a book on painting techniques that remained in print until modern times. At the end of volume five we find a chapter on “*Kōshoku shunga* [glossed as both ‘*shunga*’ and ‘*makura-e*’] *no hō*” (On the Art of Drawing Erotic *Shunga*) in which he outlines how to paint *shunga*. Moriatsu was a pupil of Ogata Yūgen (d.u.), who was a pupil of Kano Tan’yū (1602–1674), the head of the Edo branch of the Kano school directly in service to the shogun. This work was used regularly as a popular textbook for Kano techniques throughout the Edo period until Meiji. We can see from this that *shunga* was not just composed by ukiyo-e artists but was common among a wide range of artists, a significant revelation for understanding the history of *shunga*.

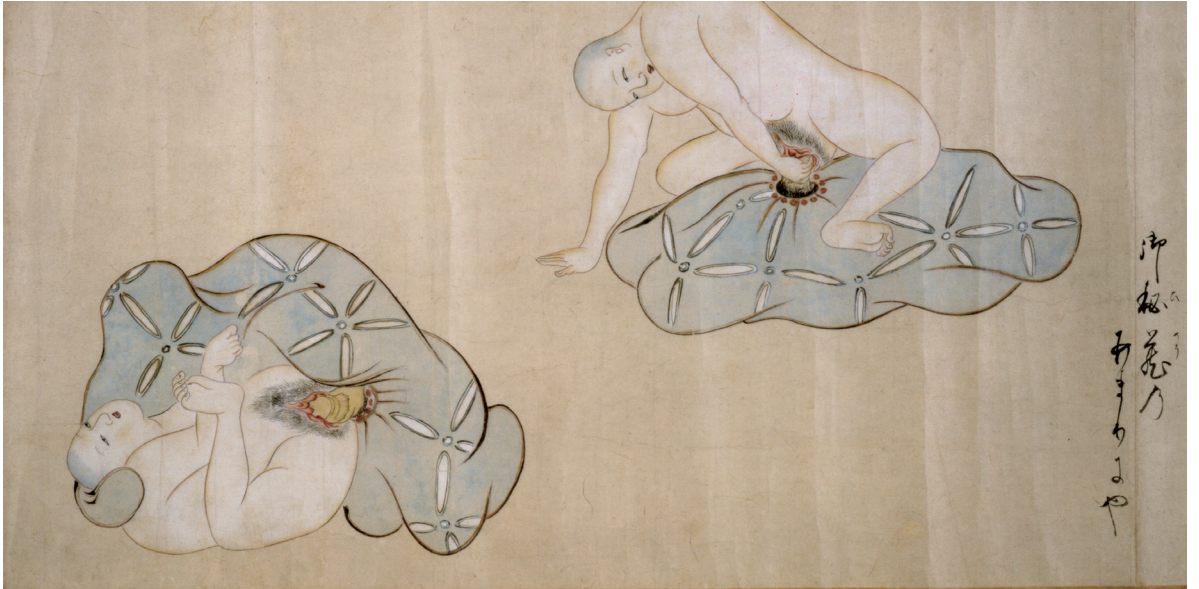


Figure 3-1



Figure 3-2

4. *Kanbun shunga emaki* 寛文春画絵巻 (*Shunga* Handscroll from the Kanbun Era)

Artist unknown. Color on paper (31.5 cm high). Ca. 1661–1673.

Many early Edo *shunga* are painted handscrolls. A characteristic of this period is that the paintings portray only the men and women without any background. Different from later ukiyo-e *shunga*, most of the figures are samurai or courtiers.



Figure 4-1. A young man and woman at play.



Figure 4-2. A samurai in full armor and his wife have sex for good luck before battle.



Figure 4-3. A young courtier man and woman.



Figure 4-4. A samurai man, woman, and acolyte frolic as a threesome.

5. *Shiki gakan* 四季春画絵巻 (Handscroll of the Four Seasons)

Tsukioka Settei (1726–1786). Color on silk, 24.6 × 67.8 cm. Ca. 1767–1772.

Tsukioka Settei was a representative ukiyo-e artist based in Osaka, who published many monochrome *shunga* books. At the same time he created many *shunga* paintings that survive today. One reason for his popularity was that it was said that having a Settei *shunga* painting in one's storehouse kept it safe from fire.

This scroll is unusual in depicting the four seasons, with one flower and one *shunga* scene for each. Each season represents stages in a lifetime. This was an innovation from the conventional series of twelve images, which had been introduced from China.

The rapid development of *shunga* in terms of quantity and quality was stimulated by the technology of woodblock printing. It was in the second half of the seventeenth century that we witness the growth of *shunga* publications. Initially these were in monochrome ink but from the time of Suzuki Harunobu we see the beginnings of multi-color printing. From the 1760s we see considerable innovation and expansion of production during a golden age in the late eighteenth century. It was then that the most famous color printed ukiyo-e that the world now calls “*shunga*” were created.

During the Edo period it is thought that at least 2,300 *shunga* books were published, but many of these were re-publications under new titles and so until we have more thorough bibliographical data, it is hard conclusively to state how many books were produced. In the book *Eiri shunga ehon mokuroku* (Heibonsha, 2007) Shirakura Yoshihiko has estimated that there were about 1,200 distinct works, and among these, if you exclude *egoyomi* (calendar prints) and *surimono* (single luxury sheets) that the number drops to more than 800. However, one item may comprise a set of twelve sheets or is a book (usually in three volumes, each with ten images). So, the number of *shunga* images is much larger, more than 30,000.

This flourishing of ukiyo-e *shunga* was fuelled by the insatiable desire of merchants and commoners for ukiyo-e in general and supported by the development of woodblock technology, which enabled the production of color prints commercially in large quantities at affordable prices. Further, virtually all of the famous ukiyo-e artists composed *shunga*, and because there was constant pressure to produce innovative works, we witness developments in *shunga* production in various directions. From the examples that we will explore below, we will be able to see the wide range of creativity in this genre.

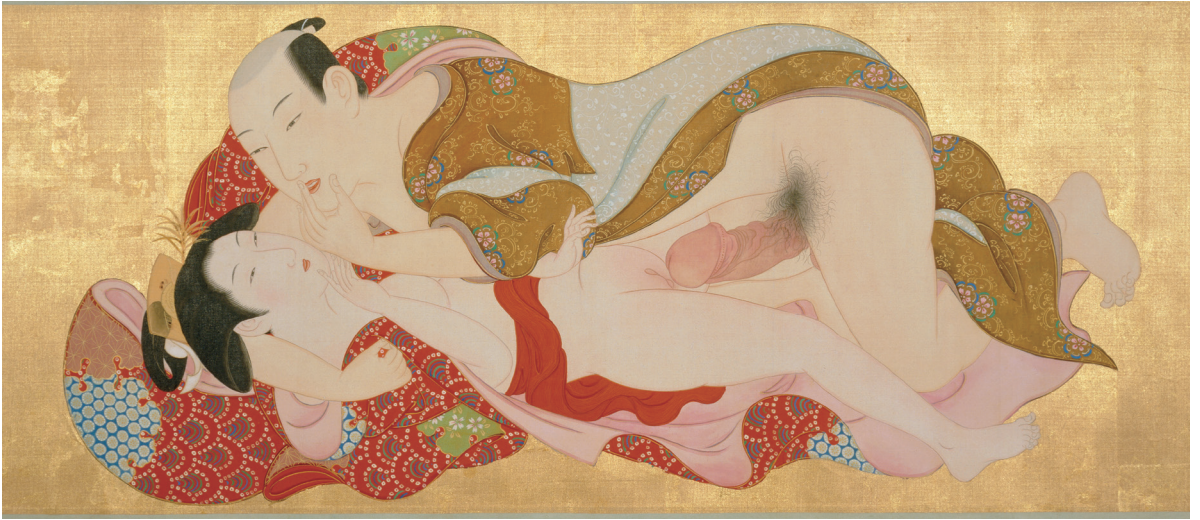


Figure 5-1. Spring: A young virgin has her first experience. This image is preceded by a branch of blossoming plum, which is the harbinger of spring.



Figure 5-2. Summer: A young woman passionately embraces her husband/lover. The flower preceding is an iris, which is a symbol for a beautiful woman.



Figure 5-3. Autumn: A pregnant woman has sex from behind. The flower before is a chrysanthemum, a symbol of long life.



Figure 5-4. Winter: A mature woman is on top here. The flower is a narcissus, which represents sensuality in a cold winter scene.