

### III. UKIYO-E *SHUNGA* PROTAGONISTS WERE THE COMMON PEOPLE

**Question 3.** In the West *shunga* is often translated as “pornography,” a term which originally meant pictures of prostitutes. Were the women portrayed in *shunga* also prostitutes?

**A.** Not only in *shunga*, but in color ukiyo-e in general, women are often portrayed with gorgeous kimonos. Many are so extravagantly attired that without knowledge of Edo-period fashion, one may think that these are expensive courtesans or fashionable women. This kind of mistake is possible not just by foreigners but also by the Japanese themselves. Today few people can distinguish the type of women in ukiyo-e, and many people on viewing *shunga* think that the scenes are meetings of high-class prostitutes and wealthy clients. However, if we carefully examine *shunga* images, we see that as many as 90 percent of the men and women who appear are ordinary citizens. Further, in this world of sex there is a wide range of ages shown in diverse settings of everyday life.

Of course it is not true that prostitutes are entirely absent. In the Edo period there were licensed pleasure quarters among which Edo’s Yoshiwara was famous, but there were also such quarters in all the cities and regions of Japan, so it was considered a normal part of life. In such quarters prostitutes entertained male clients, and in ukiyo-e *shunga* courtesans certainly appear, but they represent less than 5 percent of women in *shunga*. They are not depicted as being in an exotic world but are seen as one aspect of sexual life and customs.

Another misapprehension about *shunga* is that it depicts only wealthy or upper class society within their mansions, showing a leisured class enjoying unfettered sexuality. However, most of ukiyo-e *shunga* takes as its focus the everyday lives of the common people. Although *shunga* portrays the sexual lives of everyday folk, this does not mean that it is unsophisticated. There is of course a wide variety of male-female encounters but also male-male and female-female couplings, as well as a range of ages from adolescents and young couples to middle-aged and old folks. There is also tremendous variety in the characters and situations. We see men enticing women as well as the other way around. There are husbands being unfaithful, but also ample scenes of wives’ affairs. In this way, the world of ukiyo-e *shunga* explores the sexual mores of ordinary people in great breadth and depth. This depiction of the full flowering of human sexuality is certainly rare in world history.

Below, we will introduce a wide variety of ukiyo-e *shunga*. First let us consider scenes of married couples, a category that is not normally shown in what we usually consider “porno.”

6. *Fūryū jūniki no eiga* 風流十二季の栄花  
(Sexual Flowering over Twelve Months) (image 1)

Isoda Koryūsai (ac. 1764–1789). Set of twelve *chūban* color woodblock prints. 1773.

It is New Years Day, and a young pair are playing the board game *sugoroku* so intently that they fall asleep. They imagine the same dream of traveling along the base of Mt. Fuji. The haiku at the right of the print states: First dream of the year / a couple in spring / intimate together. We can see that they both long to be married. In the first dream of the year it is thought to be auspicious if “Fuji,” “hawk,” and “eggplant” appear, and we can find all three in this shared dream. Further, on the veranda the *fukujusō* (pheasant’s eye) flower signals spring and completes the auspicious scene.



Figure 6

7. *Ehon haru no akebono* 笑本春の曙 (**Dawn in Spring**) (vol. 1, image 1)  
 Kitao Shigemasa (1739–1820). Ink woodblock printed *hanshibon* book, 3 vols.  
 Ca. 1772.

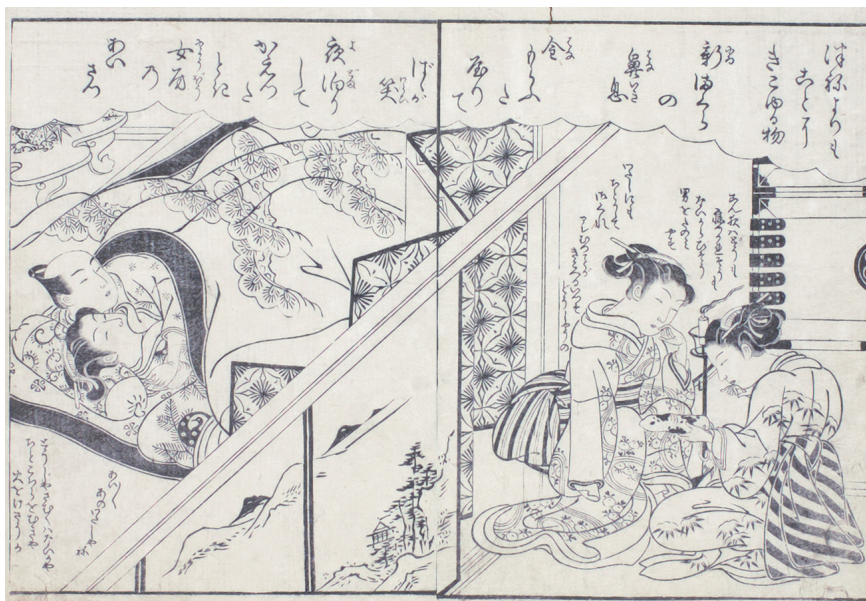


Figure 7

In a wealthy household it is the first night of the couple’s honeymoon. In the alcove of their bedroom to the left we can see an auspicious *shimadai* model of a landscape and the door is blocked by a folding screen. In the adjoining room two maids are in attendance. The image illustrates the text at the top, which is a parody from the *Pillow Book* (*Makura no sōshi* 枕草子, ca. 1000) by Sei Shōnagon: “Things we can especially hear more than usual: deep breathing of newlyweds.” The dialogue of the bride and groom, and attendants is:

Groom: “How’re you feeling? Not too cold? Turn this way a little.”

Bride: “Yes, dear, I want’d to tell you. . .”

Groom: “Shall I put out the light?”

.....

Maid One: “I can hear the lovebirds. What shall we do!”

Maid Two: “They don’t seem to be tired at all tonight. Shall we get out the little fellow (*hizō otoko*) for company?”

Maid One: “Let me have a go with it.”

The newlyweds’ conversation is delightfully innocent and the maids frankness makes us laugh. The “little fellow” is a dildo.



Figure 8

**8. *Kōshoku zue jūnikō* 好色図會十二候 (Twelve Months of Love)** (image 4)  
Katsukawa Shunchō (d.u.). Set of twelve *ōban* color woodblock prints. Ca. 1788.

A young married couple are having sex midday. Having discovered the joys of sex, this pair enjoy themselves day and night, wherever they can.

Husband: “I start feeling bad if I don’t have sex more than once a day. This is the ninth time. After we have a sleep, let’s go for seven or eight more.”

Wife: “Ah, I feel myself drifting off into pleasure. More, more, deep at the top. . . That’s it. I’m coming again. Ah, oh, ah!”

We cannot help but be impressed at the husband’s prowess, but of course this is exaggerated for comic effect. The bird in the sky is the *hototogisu* (little cuckoo), the harbinger of summer, known to sing as it flies, and its cries are said to be like those of a woman in orgasm.



Figure 9

**9. *Shikidō jūnitsugai* 色道十二番 (Twelve Couplings) (image 7)**

Torii Kiyonaga (1752–1815). Set of twelve *ōban* color woodblock prints. 1784.

A middle-aged couple are enjoying themselves after their bath. The woman wearing only a bathrobe was facing her mirror when the husband, who had come earlier from the bath, gets excited and approaches her.

Husband: “They were right to say cunt, fresh from the bath, is a delight. I’ll have my fill, have it all!”

Wife: “Now, now, quiet. What, you already . . .”

As reflected in the comic *senryū* haiku poem, “The delights after a bath / its praise / recorded even in classical texts,” and the phrase *yu bobo saké mara* (nothing better than “a cunt after a bath and a dick after drinking”), it was thought ideal to have sex when a woman had just come from her bath and the man had had a drink. Another *senryū* makes a joke on the opposite situation: “Inconvenient for the husband / just out of the bath / his wife drinking.” The wife is all ready but the husband is limp after a relaxing bath!

10. *Imayō tsuma kagami* 今様妻鑑 (Mirror for Modern Wives) (vol. 3, image 5)  
 Suzuki Harunobu (1725?–1770). Ink woodblock printed *hanshibon* book, 3 vols. Ca. 1771.

On a summer eve a married couple seek a cool breeze on the veranda after their bath. In the next room a mosquito net is hanging and we know that they have had dinner. The husband, out of the bath first, is lying down, his fan at his side. His wife arrives just from the bath. The husband says, “It’s really a scorcher tonight,” indicating that he wants to cool down a bit before bed.



Figure 10

This book includes poems at the top of the illustrations from the famous *Wakan rōeishū* 和漢朗詠集 anthology of Japanese and Chinese poems, and the erotic image reflects the verse. The Chinese poem here depicts some beautiful women, eagerly awaited at a court banquet, who finally arrive after getting dressed and finishing their make-up. The overall meaning is: “In autumn we await the full moon at night and follow its shimmering light as it descends behind a mountain ridge. On a summer day we anticipate the blossoming of a lotus flower and witness first time on the water’s surface a sensuous crimson.”

In the poem the lotus is blossoming in the garden pond, but here if we apply the poem to the image, the shimmering light of the moon is like the sensuous naked skin of the wife, and “the red lotus the shows its face on the surface of the water” most likely is the wife’s vulva visible in the opening of her kimono. Further, the sense of anticipation in the poem in the image represents the husband’s waiting impatiently for his wife to come. The lotus flower in ancient India and China also was a symbol for a pure and clean vulva.

**11. *Uta makura* 歌まくら (Poems of the Pillow) (image 11)**

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

Although poor, a middle-aged couple enjoy each other at night. The wife's face is plump with a double chin and her neck thick and full. Her arms too are muscly and her thighs full as a middle-aged woman. Her husband seen behind her has drooping, tired-looking eyes of a poor man. The pair are a rare example in ukiyo-e of actual ordinary everyday life. The focus of this image as *shunga* is on the wife, who in the midst of sex, is worried that her husband is cold and drapes the quilt over him, showing her warm heart and love for him.



Figure 11

**12. *Sode no maki* 袖の巻 (Scroll in the Sleeve) (image 7)**

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



Figure 12

A middle-aged couple. Like the previous image we see a couple both with paunches. Here both have their eyes almost closed and mouths a little open, and their arms and legs relaxed after their exertions. We can imagine that they are completely relaxed, content, and satisfied. The pillow stand has been knocked over and is prostrate in parallel with the man's flaccid member, but the focus of this image surely is the relaxed, warm, and satiated expression of the intimate couple. Their clothes have no design or patterns and this keeps the pair as the focal point. There are few *shunga* images that depict such serene and contented lovers.

**13. *Fūryū enshoku Mane'emon* 風流艶色真似ゑもん  
(Mane'emon's [Bean Man's] Erotic Adventures) (image 7)**

Suzuki Harunobu (1725?-1770). Set of twenty-four *chūban* color woodblock prints. 1770.



Figure 13



An amusing scene of an old couple on a summer eve in a farmhouse. Dinner is over and the couple are having tea and relaxing, while in the next room under the mosquito netting the son and his wife are already making love. However, the focus here is not them but the old couple. Their dialogue:

Grandpa: "Grandma, let me have a little kiss and nibble. There, over there. Listen to that racket."

Grandma: "Grandpa, what are you up to, not now !"

They can hear the noise of the young couple in the next room, which excites the grandpa who snatches a kiss from his wife. The old woman expresses her exasperation at his actions but kisses him nevertheless. The actions and text makes us smile at this peaceful country family life.