

VII. *SHUNGA* DEPICTS AND WAS FOR EVERYONE— OLD, YOUNG, MEN, WOMEN, WEALTHY, AND POOR

Question 7. If *shunga* was not primarily for sex education, then was it the same as modern pornography and contemporary erotic photographs and videos, which are aimed at men for private sexual stimulation?

A. When we think of explicit sexual representation, today it is thought to be primarily a pastime for young men, but if we examine sources from the Edo period, we see that *shunga* was consumed by both old and young, and not only men but also women enjoyed *shunga*. If we consider class, it is also clear that *shunga* was a part of the lives of commoners in city tenements, rural farmers, up to intellectuals and daimyo lords. We can now see how widespread its circulation was in society.

One important vehicle for circulation of *shunga* among the population was the system of itinerant book-lenders (*kashibon'ya*). Even if the prices of books and paintings gradually went down, the average commoner would not be able to keep up with the continuous array of new publications of print sets and books. To fill this demand, itinerant book-lenders would make regular rounds to homes and deliver orders and suggest new works. We know that the book-lenders always carried a stock of erotic works. It is also significant that such book deliveries usually were taken in by the women of the house, and so the material would have passed through their hands.

We would expect to see *senryū* comic haiku about men reading *shunga*, but there are also many comic haiku about young city girls, women in samurai service, wives and widows, and a wide variety of other women enjoying *shunga*. One late Edo record from the novelist Mori Ōgai (1862–1922) from his autobiographical *Vita Sexualis* documents an example. In the remote castle town Tsuwano, he recalls as a child coming upon an older and a younger woman looking at *shunga*.¹

We also know that samurai were interested in *shunga*. As we saw earlier in *Gasen*, the book on Kano school painting which included instruction on painting *shunga*, samurai too bought erotic works. The scholar of Edo culture Mitamura Engyo (1870–1952) wrote in an article “Abuna-e” (Dangerous pictures):

For the weddings of daimyo lords and the shogun’s retainers, sets of twelve *shunga* would always be included in the bride’s trousseau. They would have elegant wrap-

1 Mori Ōgai. *Vita Sexualis*, trans. Kazuji Ninomiya and Sanford Goldstein. Rutland, VT: Charles E. Tuttle, 1972, pp. 34–35.

pings 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.²

Today we sometimes see gorgeous *shunga* paintings emerge from old samurai family holdings. Mitamura Engyo also commented on another aspect of samurai and *shunga*.

Also, in daimyo and hatamoto (bannerman) households every generation would create new armor and it was customary to place one *shunga* scroll in the armor chest.³

This custom gradually spread to wealthy commoners as well, where it became common to include *shunga* in storehouses as protection against fire. In the Kyoto/Osaka area in particular the *shunga* of Tsukioka Settei (1726–1786) was treasured.

Aside from these auspicious or talisman-like elements of *shunga*, it is clear that many powerful samurai and Confucian scholars, as well as other intellectuals and literati were fond of *shunga*. Some examples are listed below. The influential Confucian scholar Ogyū Sorai (1666–1728) wrote a reference to Zhuangzi on a *shunga*;⁴ the mult-talented government official Yanagisawa Kien (1704–1758) referred to *shunga* in his writings;⁵ the daimyo Yanagisawa Nobutoki (1725–1792) noted in his diary sending a *shunga* book to his mistress;⁶ the scholar of National Learning Yamaoka Matsuake (1726–1780) researched *shunga*;⁷ the government official and literati Ōta Nanpo (1749–1823) recorded his large personal collection of *shunga* and is thought to have published *shunga* himself.⁸

The government official Kawaji Toshiakira (1801–1868), who was a key player in the negotiations between the Tokugawa government and Commodore Perry in the 1850s, wrote in his diary about a senior official's request to borrow a Hishikawa Moronobu *shunga*.

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

2 Mitamura Engyo. "Abuna-e." 1925. In vol. 21 of *Mitamura Engyo zenshū*. Chūō Kōronsha, 1977, pp. 413–14.

3 Mitamura Engyo. "Abuna-e." 1925. In vol. 21 of *Mitamura Engyo zenshū*. Chūō Kōronsha, 1977, p. 414.

4 Matura Seizan. "Kasshi yawa." *Waido-ban Tōyō bunko: Kasshi yawa zokuhon*, vol. 2, ed. Nakamura Yukihiko and Nakano Mitsutoshi. Heibonsha, 1979, p. 119.

5 Yanagisawa Kien. "Hitori ne." 1724. In *Zuhibitsu bungaku senshū*, ed. Kusunose Makoto. Shosaidō, 1927, p. 28.

6 Yanagisawa Nobutoki. *Enyū nikki*. 1785. In vol. 13 of *Nihon shomin bunka shiryō shūsei*, ed. Geinōshi Kenkyūkai. San'ichi Shobō, 1977, p. 683.

7 Ōta Nanpo. "Zokuji kosui." 1788. In vol. 2 of *Enseki jishu*. Kokusho Kankōkai, 1908, p. 83.

8 Ōta Nanpo. "Nanpo bunko zōshomoku." In vol. 19 of *Ōta Nanpo zenshū*, ed. Hamada Giichirō. Iwanami Shoten, 2001, pp. 414–16.

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.⁹

Kawaji's wife upon hearing of this incident wrote, "I was really impressed and delighted to hear the story about venerable old Murata."¹⁰

We can see that in the Edo period *shunga* was not something for young men alone, but was truly for old and young, men and women, wealthy and poor, and enjoyed widely in society.

36. *Ehon kantan makura* 笑本邯鄲枕 (Picture Book: Kantan's Pillow) (image 12)
Takehara Shunchōsai (d. 1800). Horizontal ink woodblock printed book. Ca. 1779.

A youth looks at a *shunga* book and masturbates. He says: "I can't hold back any longer. Ah, that feels great." A young man and woman are watching. Their dialogue is:

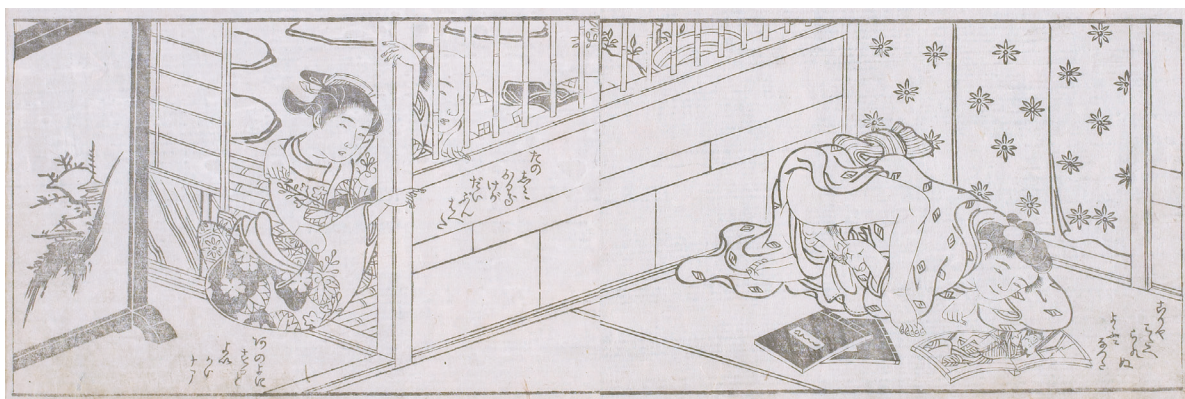


Figure 36

Man: "He seems to be enjoying himself. Even has quite a bit of pubic hair now."

Woman: "Does it feel good to do what he is doing?"

The man may be the elder brother and the woman his girlfriend. She is keen to learn about what sex is like for men.

9 Kawaji Toshiakira. "Naniwa nikki." 1851. In vol. 6 of *Kawaji Toshiakira monjo*, ed. Fujii Jintarō. Nihon Shiseki Kyōkai, 1934, pp. 95–96.

10 Kawaji Sato. "Kawaji Satoko nikki," vol. 2, p. 102. National Diet Library.

37. *Bidō nichiya jobōki* 艶道日夜女宝記

(A Treasure Book for Women on the Way of Love—Day and Night)

Tsukioka Settei (1726–1786). Horizontal ink woodblock printed book. Ca. 1764.

This book is a parody of a popular home medical book, *Idō nichiyō chōhōki* (A Treasure Book of Medicine—For Daily Use). The book opens interestingly with a discussion on the evils of masturbation. The reasoning is fascinating. Let’s hear what they say:

Methods for Massaging (Masturbation) Oneself

It is said that for both men and women masturbation (massage) drains one’s energy and ruins one’s health, but if one’s blood does not circulate well, then on the contrary, he or she will get ill. If people always keep their blood circulating well among the five organs through regular masturbation, the circulation will ensure one’s sperm will stay healthy. A lustful woman told us: “Masturbation helps me to calm my passions and keeps my blood circulating well, and so keeps me from indiscretions and lively at the same time. It also keeps my vagina soft. Therefore, using a dildo keeps me in balance and clears my troubles.

However, since I often think about having sex, but have no one to hold me, I must depend on the strength in my hand, and in the end my shoulders get stiff and I have to seek out a masseur to give me acupuncture to loosen my muscles. It is certainly a joke that I need a massage to cure the pains of self-massaging!”



Figure 37-1



Figure 37-2

This is followed by a series of illustrations of women masturbating, and here we see the first one of a maiden looking at *shunga* masturbating. The text reads:

An inexperienced woman should seek out a *shunga* book (*makura-e*) to get into the mood. Then when turned on a bit, she should use some kind of round-ended utensil to open a path and naturally will feel pleasure. After doing this she will feel no pain or distress when she sleeps with a man.

After the series of women, we see a man masturbating while looking at a *shunga* hanging scroll. The man says: “Too bad I can’t hold her for real!” The scroll shows a woman sitting with her legs open, but as we have seen *shunga* almost always presents a couple, and no examples like this have been found. This kind of image may have been imagined but it was rare in *shunga* itself.

38. *Fūryū sandai makura* 風流三代枕 (Elegant Pillows: Three Generations) (vol. 1, image 1)

Kikukawa Hidenobu (ac. 1764–1781). Ink woodblock printed *hanshibon* book, 5 vols. 1765.



Figure 38

A woman masturbates with a dildo while looking at *shunga*. The text says:

“I’m glad that I have this position, but if I am in service all my life, I’ll never be free to have sex like this. Wish I could be like them!”

The woman most likely has a good position in service to a samurai residence and can go home only rarely. She has little chance of marriage and relations with men were banned. We have *shunga* showing deliveries by merchants of sex toys and *shunga* along with goods such as toiletries and other necessities. This may have been a fantasy of those on the outside, but it may as well have reflected the reality of life among such cloistered women.

39. *Neya byōbu* 閨屏風 (Painted Screens in the Boudoir) (image 10)

Torii Kiyonobu (1664–1729). Set of twelve *ōban* ink woodblock prints. 1711.

This seems to be in a brothel; an older man with a cap on his head is lying naked, looking at a *shunga* scroll and laughing. Behind him sits a courtesan leaning on him and looking at the scroll, smiling. However, the usual focus of the man's penis is small and flaccid. The attendant (*kamuro*) seems to be smiling at the irony of the situation. This may represent an aspect of play in the pleasure quarters in the early Edo period.



Figure 39

40. *Shunjō yubi ningyō* 春情指人形 (Spring Passions and Sex Toys)

(vol. 3, image 1)

Keisai Eisen (1790–1848). Color woodblock printed *hanshibon* book, 3 vols. Ca. 1838.

A nanny in a wealthy home is teaching reading and writing to the son. The dialogue helps us understand what is going on:

Nanny: “Look, look at this. This shows you where and how you put your hand in. There is text as well. Turn the page to the next one. The text above this image is really interesting too. Like in this next image, could you do this to me? I’m flushing red!”

We see that the nanny is reading a *shunga* book with text as a school book, and that she gets excited before her pupil does. We wonder if this is showing a hidden aspect of private tutoring in such households.



Figure 40

41. *Haikai yobukodori* 拝開よぶこどり (Picture Book: Haiku Cuckoo or Worshipping a Woman's Pussy at Night) (image 7)

Katsukawa Shunshō (1726–1792). Set of twelve *ōban* color woodblock prints. 1788.

An older man is seducing a young woman. The book the woman is reading has the title starting with “erotic book,” so we can surmise that she is reading a *shunga* book. Their dialogue is:

Man: “I’ve loaned you a valuable book, so I’m expecting some kind of payment in return.”

Woman: “This book is really different. Somehow I feel a bit funny.”

Man: “The first time might hurt a bit so be ready for it. My cock is a magnificent rod as you can see.”

Woman: “It’ll be bad if someone barges in on us, so make it quick. I’m a bit scared. My heart is pounding.”

Man: “You’ll be glad that you took my advice. You’re still a virgin at sixteen and will be known as without a pussy, and branded for life as a cripple. Be thankful to me for saving you from such a fate.”

Woman: “I’ve come to fancy you. I’ll bear it even if it hurts.”



Figure 41

We can see that the man lent her the book and is using it to cleverly seduce the girl. We can imagine that *shunga* was used in this way.

The phrase “*ana-nashi*” (without a pussy) was a slang reference to the famous beauty and poet Ono no Komachi, who was thought never to have given herself to a man, and had her vulva closed up.

42. *Edo miyage* 艶囃美哉花 (**Souvenirs of Edo**) (vol. 2, image 4)

Katsukawa Shunchō (d.u.). Ink woodblock printed *hanshibon* book, 3 vols. 1787.

An itinerant book-lender is showing books to a mother and daughter. We can see that the book he is holding is a *shunga* volume. These book-lenders regularly made rounds to houses bringing orders and suggesting new titles. They are said to have always brought *shunga*.

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.”

We can see that the man is using the *shunga* to seduce the daughter and on the following page we see the successful result of his strategy.



Figure 42

43. *Ehon iro no chigusa* 会本色能知功佐

(Picture Book: Variations on Love) (vol. 3, image 6)

Kitagawa Utamaro (1753–1806). Ink woodblock printed *hanshibon* book, 3 vols. 1798.

In one corner we see a stack of books wrapped in cloth, and can guess that this is a book-lender. The woman seems to be a nun from her cap, but let's look at the dialogue:

Book-lender: "I may look like your late husband but my piece is very different. Wow, how nice!"

Widow: "My nice Book-lender, take me as you will. It's been a long time since I've had sex with a handsome man. Ah.."

Book-lender: "Rather than looking at a *jōruri* play text, how about a *shunga* book by Utamaro?"

.....

Maid: "Quiet, quiet! Listen. It's all going according to plan."

The image doesn't show any erotic books but the book-lender makes it clear what he has got, and that Utamaro is inserting an advertisement for his own *shunga* books. It seems to have been the case that *shunga* circulated widely this way and that women were regular customers.



Figure 43

44. *Ehon kantan makura* 笑本邯鄲枕 (**Picture Book: Kantan's Pillow**) (image 11)
Takehara Shunchōsai (d. 1800). Horizontal ink woodblock printed book. Ca. 1779.



Figure 44

On a winter evening two women are warming themselves under a *kotatsu* brazier while looking at a *shunga* scroll. There is an image today of pornography being the sole prerogative of men, but one may be surprised to learn that there are illustrations of women alone or with another viewing *shunga*. This image reminds us of the scene described by Mori Ōgai in his novel *Vita Sexualis*, noted earlier.

45. *Neya no hinagata* 閨の雛形 (**Patterns for the Bedroom**) (image 8)
Okumura Masanobu (1686–1764). Set of twelve *ōban* lacquered color prints. Ca. 1750.

A young couple are making love. We see a *shunga* book open at their side. They were perhaps looking at it before. From the poem above we can learn that this is Yaoya Oshichi and the acolyte Kichisaburō, famous from *jōruri* and kabuki theater. We can expect then that the scene is in a temple's library.

The book title is *Senbon-zakura* (Thousand Cherry Trees) and is most likely Masanobu's own *Genkurō kitsune senbon-zakura* 源九郎狐千本桜, a three-volume book published around 1749.



Figure 45

**46. *Fūryū enshoku Mane'emon* 風流艶色真似ゑもん
(Mane'emon's Erotic Adventures) (image 10)**

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

Another image from the Mane'emon series. The setting is a farm village far from Edo; in a silkworm room, we see a couple having sex. In the adjacent room we also see a voyeur, a naked old man holding a candle. This is a peculiar picture that requires the text to understand it. First the couple:

Man: “My elder brother brought some Edo *shunga* home as a souvenir and it made me randy.”

Woman: “Now, now. Doing it in front of the silkworms will dirty them.”



Figure 46

We learn that the man has been stimulated by the Edo *shunga* his brother brought home and wants to make love to his wife straightaway in the silkworm room. This too seems to be Harunobu advertising his own works, but we know that *shunga* became early on a favorite souvenir of Edo to be brought back to the countryside.

On the other hand, the wife is pushing the husband away and denying him because there was a superstition that having sex in front of silkworms would pollute them and they would not produce good silk. Farmers were very careful and treasured their silkworms. The master of the house hears the commotion and is concerned. Master: "Strange clatter in the silkworm room—might be a mouse among the worms." He takes the candle to check. The joke is about the simpleton rustic fellow who gets so excited by the Edo *shunga*.

47. *Ehon haru no akebono* 笑本春の曙 (Dawn in Spring) (vol. 3, image 8)
Kitao Shigemasa (1739–1820). Ink woodblock printed *hanshibon* book, 3 vols. Ca. 1772.

The text lists “three auspicious things”:

- Happy couples
- Individuals who never tire of having sex
- Funny tales about pussies and penises

This image is an example of the first of these, a happy couple. The two have a *shunga* book open at their feet and are looking at it before making love. The text is:

Husband: “I’m suddenly horny, so even though it’s still light, let’s have a session.”

Wife: “What! You’re rushing too much. Let me at least turn toward you.”

Although it is still daylight, the couple are looking at *shunga* and make love—truly an auspicious day!



Figure 47