

BOOK REVIEW

Erotic Japonisme: The Influence of Japanese Sexual Imagery on Western Art

Ricard Bru

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Shunga, or Japanese erotica, never fails to get a rise out of scholars and the public, and the past few years have seen a deluge of international activity surrounding *shunga*. Much as the 1995 conference, *Sexuality and Edo Culture, 1750–1850*, held at Indiana University in Bloomington offered new directions in *shunga* studies (Jones 1996), recent research has opened up new pathways in the field. The four-year International Shunga Project involving scholars from Nichibunken, SOAS (London University) and Ritsumeikan University has so far generated a special issue of *Japan Review* (Gerstle and Clark 2013), an exhibition at the British Museum in 2013–2014, and an exhibition catalogue (Clark et al. 2013).

One of the new paths prompted by the project is a transnational trajectory. Ricard Bru's study, *Erotic Japonisme: The Influence of Japanese Sexual Imagery on Western Art*, is one of the few monographs to deal explicitly with the influence from *shunga* on Western art. Featuring 167 full-color images, Bru's study verses the novice reader in the ABCs, or perhaps *i-ro-has*, of *shunga* and European erotic imagery of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. From the early 1860s, when the first *shunga* appeared in Paris shops, to the early decades of the twentieth century, Bru explores *shunga* from an aesthetic and artistic perspective in an "effort to understand how they [*shunga*] were perceived and interpreted by European artists, and to outline the prevailing artistic canons during the era of Japonisme" (p. viii). Building on previous exhibitions he has curated, such as *Secret Images: Picasso and the Japanese Erotic Print* (Bru and Gual 2010), Bru utilizes his expansive knowledge of European art and *shunga* to show how the discovery of *shunga* by European artists "caused the shift toward new modes of portraying sex and eroticism from the 1880s onward" (p. 148).

Perhaps due to the lack of scholarship on the reception, spread, and influence of *shunga* in the West, Bru offers mostly bird's eye views with a few close-ups in this three-chapter study. The introduction situates the influx of Japanese erotic art against the Romantic Orientalism of the eighteenth century, and European Realism of the nineteenth century. Chapter 1 contextualizes foreign trade with Japan and the history of erotic imagery in Japan. Perhaps of most interest in this chapter are the art dealers Siegfried Bing (1838–1905) and Hayashi Tadamasa (1853–1906). Bing began to deal in Japanese art in the 1870s, and went on to open four shops in Paris by 1881, making him "one of the largest dealers of Japanese art in Europe" (p. 37). Hayashi arrived in Paris in 1878 to work at the second Exposition Universelle as a French interpreter. After Bing left the Japanese art trade in the

1890s, Hayashi succeeded him as the premier procurer of Japanese woodblock prints and books. In an interesting twist, in 1872 the Japanese government issued the Ordinance Relating to Public Morals, prohibiting the sale of *shunga* and declaring them “obscene material” (*waisetsu*) (p. 38). As a result, Hayashi was declared to have sullied his country’s honor by selling vulgar designs to foreigners (p. 41).

Chapter 2 analyzes the collection of *shunga* and the networks of research and exchange that circulated these images through Europe. In addition to relating the history of *shunga* collections in Europe, Bru also points to scholarly output on *shunga* in European languages, such as *Outamaro: le peintre des maisons vertes* (1891) by Edmond de Goncourt (1822–96) with the assistance of the aforementioned Hayashi Tadamasu; *Les érotiques japonais* (1925) by Françoise Poncetton (1875–1950); and *Japanische Erotik* (1907) attributed to Julius Kurth (1870–1949). As a lead-in to the final chapter and a genealogy of *shunga* studies in Europe, this chapter acquaints the reader with the state of *shunga* studies in the past and the present.

Chapter 3, “The Impact of *Shunga* on European Art,” occupies the majority of the volume, and contains the main thrust of Bru’s argument. This final chapter also offers the most persuasive close readings of images. One particular motif upon which Bru lavishes attention is that of eroticized cephalopods. Bru tracks the popularity of this motif to an illustration by Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849) in the third volume of *Pine Seedlings on the First Rat Day* (*Kinoe no komatsu*, 1814). This infamous image shows two octopi getting acquainted with a fisherwoman in the most biblical of ways. Bru traces the influence of this image, as well as other imaginings of a cross-species tryst, upon the Decadent, Symbolist, and Modernist circles through many objects and images (pp. 90–98). In the rest of this chapter, Bru’s writing tends to focus on major artists, starting with the French (Degas, Toulouse-Lautrec, Rodin), and then, following the flows of Japanese erotic imagery in Europe, moves to discussions of Belgian, British, German, Spanish, and Austrian artists before ending with a substantial section devoted to the *shunga* collection of Pablo Picasso.

In casting so wide a net, Bru’s study moves too quickly for the reader at times. In the blink of an eye, discussion on *japonisme* in Belgium has ended and he has moved on to Austrian interpretations. The most enjoyable parts of the monograph are when he focuses in on a collector, or forges imagistic connections between *shunga* and European art. The expansive task of tracing *shunga*’s influence upon Western art, which seems mostly to derive from established artists well placed in the canon, demands that he focus on a wide breadth instead of targeted depths. However, with so little transnational work on *shunga* done, such an expansive work may indeed be necessary. Another question that arises from Bru’s study is the connection between the erotic and the oriental; that is, what are the risks and possibilities of linking these two terms?

Pulling from collections all over the world, reproducing images in gorgeous full color, and bridging scholarly dialogue between Japan and Europe, Bru’s monograph emphasizes the import of transnationalism and erotica in the story of Modernist artistic production.

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