

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

The word *shunga* is written with two Chinese characters meaning “spring painting.” The character for spring (*shun*), as in the word *shunjō* (sexual passion), refers to human sexual desires, and accordingly *shunga* are pictures depicting the sexual customs of men and women. The history of *shunga* in Japan is quite old, with documentation dating back to the Nara period (8<sup>th</sup> century).<sup>1</sup> By the Heian period (9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> centuries), *shunga* pictures were already being created as objects of aesthetic appreciation apart from medical reasons.<sup>2</sup> However, nowadays in speaking of *shunga*, most people think of the erotic woodblock prints by Edo-period (17<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries) ukiyo-e artists such as Kitagawa Utamaro (Figure 1) and Katsushika Hokusai (Figure 2). Ukiyo-e *shunga* was produced in enormous quantities in the Edo period, to the extent that there are not any famous ukiyo-e artists who did not create *shunga*, and followed a truly colorful development.

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1. The term *osokuzu* (pictures of men and women sharing the same bedding), referring to medical illustrations of sexual intercourse, can be found in the decree of medicine and disease titled *Isbitsurei* (laws for medical care) in the *Taibō nitsuryō* (legal code compiled in 701).
  2. There is a reference to *shunga* as paintings to be aesthetically appreciated in the “Biography of Tsunesada Shinnō” (short biography of the second son (825-884) of Emperor Junna) included in the biographical section of volume 8 of the *Zoku gunsho ruijū*.



Figure 1. From the *Utamakura* (Pillow Book), a set of twelve prints by Kitagawa Utamaro (1753-1806), after *Utamakura*, vol. 1 of *Ukiyo-e hizô meihin shû*, Tokyo: Gakushû Kenkyûsha, 1991.

This is regarded as Utamaro's *shunga* masterpiece. The varied use of colors and brilliant hues, the rhythmic movement of the calligraphic lines defining the kimono, and the crisp description of the figures are superb.



Figure 2. From the *Namichidori* (Plovers over Waves), a set of twelve prints by Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849), after *Namichidori*, vol. 2 of *Ukiyo-e hizô meihin shû*, Tokyo: Gakushû Kenkyûsha, 1991.

This is Hokusai's *shunga* masterpiece. While exaggerating the size of the male penis is an expressive device characteristic of ukiyo-e *shunga*, a special feature of Hokusai's *shunga* is that women's genitalia are also magnified. Here the genitalia of the man and woman are almost the same size as their faces and depicted in elaborate detail.

The primary aim of this book is to provide a detailed reading and explanation of Suzuki Harunobu's *shunga*, illustration by illustration, in an attempt to revive the pleasures of Edo-period *shunga*. Nowadays people are captivated by the frank expression of sexuality, regarding ukiyo-e *shunga* simply as erotic pictures to excite sexual desires. But actually a variety of witty artifices are employed in ukiyo-e *shunga*, and thus they are not simply lascivious pictures. For example, there are the backgrounds and objects painted into the scenes, the narrative passages appearing above the illustrations and poetic inscriptions (*waka*, *kanshi*, *senryū*, *kyōka*, etc.) alluding to the circumstances in the pictures, as well as the lines of text written nearby the figures (recording the conversations of the people). Contemporaries of the artist, while “reading” these artifices, enjoyed the diversity of circumstances in the world of sexuality. I am focusing on Suzuki Harunobu's *shunga* in this monograph because these kinds of artifices are clearly revealed in his *shunga* illustrations.

The second aim of this book is to clarify the meaning of the artifice known as *mitate-e*—a forte of Suzuki Harunobu—through *shunga*. According to the dictionary, *mitate-e* are pictures in which the figures or backgrounds have been changed to depict contemporary customs, while taking classical Japanese and Chinese themes and events as subject matter. Artists inject their own cultivation and wit into these changes, and viewers take pleasure in figuring out the “puzzles.” I believe that concealed within the conception of *mitate* is something that goes beyond a simple artifice—the foundation of a special way of looking at things in Japanese culture. Within that special “way of looking at things,” *ga naru mono* (elegant things) and *zoku naru mono* (mundane or vulgar things) are superimposed on each other. To be specific, in Harunobu's *mitate-e shunga*, depictions of everyday sexual customs which can be viewed as *zoku chū no zoku* (vulgar amid the vulgar) are overlaid with the *ga* (elegant) world of Japanese and Chinese classical literature. Thus his work is well suited for investigating the meaning behind *mitate-e*.

The third aim of this study is to naturally bring out in relief the characteristics of Edo people's ways of looking at sexuality through Suzuki Harunobu's *shunga*. As can be surmised from the fact that *shunga* was gen-

erally called *warai-e* or “pictures for laughs” in the Edo period, the populace did not regard sex as something that was taboo or obscene, but rather “something to be laughed at.” This does not imply vulgar or ridiculing laughter, but rather imperceptibly causing viewers to smile. It would be wonderful if the readers of this book could enjoy even a little bit of the warm-hearted laughter of the *shunga* by Harunobu we will be looking at.

