

Examining Utagawa Kuniyoshi's Yose-e: The Playfulness and the Grotesque in the Floating World

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Abstract: Utagawa Kuniyoshi is a highly regarded Japanese woodblock print-making master; most of his works are welcomed by the mass, for they address most aspects of civilians' everyday life in Late Edo Japan. However, some of his works seem set on uncommon themes with distorted expressions that make them less pleasing than simple popular art. This work aims at deciphering Kuniyoshi's unconventional yose-e woodblock printings by contextualizing his works under the tradition of creating playful and grotesque ukiyo-e during the late Tokugawa period. By using theories of Edo aesthetics in these unattractive, sometimes disturbing images, this essay attempts to locate the cultural position of this relatively obscure branch of Late Edo ukiyo-e designing.

Keywords: Ukiyo-e, Yose-e, Utagawa Kuniyosh, Woodblock print, Grotesque, Late Tokugawa Period

1. Introduction

Born with the name "pictures of the floating world," one central theme of ukiyo-e is illustrations of urban entertainment of townspeople, such as their love for the energetic world of kabuki theatre and the nightlife in the red-light district, Yoshiwara. As a cultural commodity, Ukiyo-e's reflections of the secular world in the late Edo period were often highly formalised and visually pleasing. As one of the most renowned ukiyo-e masters, Utagawa Kuniyoshi touched on an extensive range of subjects during his artistic life; most of his woodblock print works were designed to be humorous and sarcastic in a straightforward way, but there are also a small number of his works playing with much obscure literary or political references. Therefore, the existence of ukiyo-e that deviates from the visually pleasing works to varying degrees raises the question of why printmakers represented by Kuniyoshi continued to explore this unconventional style.

To answer this question, this essay will look at the playfulness and the grotesque side of ukiyo-e designs of the late Tokugawa period through Kuniyoshi's unconventional works, which are categorized as yose-e (translated as "gather-together paintings"), and examine the logic behind the depictions of these unattractive, grotesque, and sometimes disturbing images. Analysis of these designs will start from the visual aspects, including the texts, the composition, the pattern, and the colour. I will then compare Kuniyoshi's works with those created by contemporary ukiyo-e artists by contextualizing them with the tradition of political insinuation, kabuki theatres, and Yoshiwara; At last, I will highlight Kuniyoshi's designs in terms of their connection with the unique Edo aesthetics system (iki) from a theoretical level, the objective of which is to discover the hidden information in

unconventional designs and to understand the theoretical roots of the late Edo playfulness and grotesque.

2. Dissidents from the Chōnin Class: Contextualizing Utagawa Kuniyoshi and Ukiyo-e in the Late Tokugawa Period

Born in a grassroots silk-dyeing family, Kuniyoshi grew up helping his father's business as a silk dyer, which led him to the world of patterns and colours. Showing his talent in this area, he was taken as an apprentice in 1811 by Utagawa Toyokuni, the well-respected ukiyo-e masters from the Utagawa school and chose the artistic name Utagawa Kuniyoshi when he later graduated in 1814. Like some of his contemporary artists, Kuniyoshi dabbled in nearly all the popular genres of ukiyo-e after his career took off, including warriors (musha-e), legends and folklore, kabuki actors (yakusha-e), women (bijin-ga), and erotica (shunga). Among all these popular genres, Kuniyoshi is mainly known for his imaginative and novel designs depicting warriors, historical figures and events, and legends. However, he also did a considerable number of works in the less-known genre asobi-e, which is the "play pictures" covering doodles, satire, manga, and caricatures.

To better understand Kuniyoshi's ukiyo-e painting career, it is necessary to briefly talk about the rise of a new social class. In the early Edo period, a new social class of townsmen known as the Chōnin class emerged, most of whom were merchants, but artisans could also be included; Kuniyoshi belonged to this class. During the Edo period, townspeople gradually gained economic power that surpassed their social class. However, the political environment stayed mostly "oligarchic or autocratic", and they were still given nearly no official recognition for engaging in political interaction [1]. However, moving onto the late Edo period, the Tokugawa shogunate became economically enfeebled, and the samurai class felt threatened by the increasing prosperity of townspeople. To strengthen their rule, the shogunate carried out several reforms, during which the lifestyle of the townspeople was viewed as vulgar or morally corrupted. The death of shogun Tokugawa Ienari in 1841 became the catalyst of Tenpō Reforms (1841-43), during which morality and sumptuary restrictions were carried out. As a significant part of cultural commodities produced by the Chōnin class, woodblock prints and their designers were directly affected. Several popular subjects, such as kabuki actors, geishas and courtesans, were strictly prohibited, which heavily stifled the production of yakusha-e, bijin-ga and shunga. In addition, the governmental control of dissenting opinions was strengthened. Given the harsh reality, Woodblock printmakers had to experiment with different ways to insinuate their opinions through imagery, and historical events became rich and hands-on materials.

In 1843, Kuniyoshi designed a famous satirical triptych by portraying the current shogun Tokugawa Ieyoshi as Minamoto Yorimitsu, whom monstrous earth spiders revenged. Noticing this work, the shogunate took offence by it and responded by confiscating the original woodblocks and destroying all the remaining unsold prints, while Kuniyoshi was officially reprimanded at the same time [2]. As one can imagine, Kuniyoshi was not the first woodblock printmaker arrested by the shogunate during that period. Before Kuniyoshi, several woodblocks prints masters had also struggled during reforms, including Kitagawa Utamaro, the master of bijin-ga. In 1804, Utamaro was sentenced to three days of imprisonment and 50 days of home arrest for portraying Toyotomi Hideyoshi to mock the shogun's profligate lifestyle. Compared with Kuniyoshi's innuendo, Utamaro's images were explicit and bold, for he openly painted Hideyoshi "holding the hand of his page Ishida Mitsunari in a sexually suggestive manner...and another of Hideyoshi with his five consorts...displays the names of each consort while placing them in the typical poses of courtesans at a Yoshiwara party." [3]. Utamaro's confrontation with censorship is yet another proof that using insinuation in artistic creativities was sometimes a must for survival.

3. Art of Deception: Reading the Hidden Ambivalence from Yose-e

As a small branch of ukiyo-e, yose-e falls into the category of asobi-e, or "play pictures". Most asobi-e were produced during the nineteenth century and characterized by creativity and intelligence. When putting these works together, they look like funny-looking people in funny outfits trying to make the viewer laugh. At first sight, these works have a visual impact that is somewhat strange, unnatural, and disturbing. However, there is also a sense of humour when examining these distorted bodies separately: their postures and positions were designed to be awkward and funny. Kuniyoshi's yose-e series interestingly has another name damashi-e(だまし絵), which can be translated as the "cheating paintings". At the same time, many refer to it as the Japanese version of trompe l'oeil. As the name suggests, the nature of these paintings is to deceive the beholders of their true meanings through playing with words and iconographs; this layer of lying was not only shown in the way Kuniyoshi drew characters by gathering people or animals together but also in the way he filled these images with puzzling, self-contradictory messages all over.



Figure 1: みかけはこわいがとんだいい人だ “At first glance, he looks scary, but he is a nice person”, Utagawa, Kuniyoshi. 1830s



Figure 2: 年よりのような若い人だ A young woman who looks like an old lady, Utagawa, Kuniyoshi. 1850



Figure 3: 年が寄っても若い人だ A man that is aged up but still young, Utagawa, Kuniyoshi.
Years unknown

Viewers could perceive Kuniyoshi's strange sense of humour simply from the seemingly contradicting titles of the selected three: Figure 1's title, He Looks Scary, But He is a Nice Guy (みかけはこわいがとんだいい人だ), followed by Figure 2's, A Young Woman Who Looks Like An Old Lady (年よりのような若い人だ) and Figure 3's, He May be Old, But He is Young (年が寄っても若い人だ). For the last one, Kuniyoshi threw on punning besides the paradoxical sentence, for the phrase 年が寄っても could be understood as "ageing up" but also literally "putting the years together"; in this case, it is an indication of the way he composed the portrait by gathering the images of the twelve Chinese zodiac animals that represent years together and transforming them into this man's features and body. The extensive use of Somewhat silly and self-contradictory puns in titles suggests that Kuniyoshi anticipated confusion from the audience when fleshing out the works with strong visual impact.

Kuniyoshi's favour of using allusions was demonstrated through his titling and in these doggerel-like texts short on the background of each painting. The poem in Figure 1 above reads:

大ぜいの人がよってたかって
とうとういい人をこしらえた
とかく 人の事は人にしてもらわねば
いい人にはならぬ
Many people got together
and finally made a good man out of him.
You cannot be a good person
If you let other people do your work for you.

When taken out of context, this short poem seems to have an edifying purpose that came out of nowhere. Nonetheless, Katsuya Hirano showed how it could be construed as an ingenious political satire when connecting the dots of the historical reference implied in the human figure. In Hirano's analysis of Kuniyoshi's works about the Japanese tradition of grotesque realism, he points out that the "scary man" actually refers to historical figure Asahina Yoshihide, a legendary warrior in the thirteenth century that Kuniyoshi and his school fellow artists had both touched on. This can be seen in the Large wind-up automaton of Asahina Saburo made by Utagawa Sadahide, where the kimono pattern is the same as of the "scary man"; Kuniyoshi later also did prints on this subject, as in this Asahina Kobitojima asobi (Asahina playing on the island of little people).



Figure 4: *Asahina Kobitojima asobi* (*Asahina playing on the island of little people*), Utagawa Kuniyoshi, Woodblock print, triptych, 14 5/8 x 9 7/8 in. 37.1 x 25.1 cm, circa 1844

Notice how these features of Figure 1 resemble those in Figure 4 so much: the huge hanging nose, the wide-opening glaring eyes, and the high-rising eyebrows, all contributing to this expression. Hirano notes how Kuniyoshi “depicted the warrior hero as a yakko (奴), an outlaw and occasionally a laborer working primarily for the samurai class”, which points to the fact that Asahina is a samurai hero” [4]. However, when his face and body was made up of numerous commoner laborers, Kuniyoshi managed to efface the hero identity of the samurai class through furnishing this image with “structural irregularity and thematic confusion” [5]. The title's sarcastic nature towards the samurai class was fully unveiled until this point, and all these came from the deliberately contradictory, through which Kuniyoshi presents a metamorphosing phrase, ridiculing the norm of "beauty" and "ugliness", like this exploring the possibility beyond the value system that the samurai class was pushing.

Despite the political connotations, Utagawa's skillful techniques of distortion and exaggeration of body movements and expression were not an isolated case during his period either. Born thirty-eight years before Kuniyoshi, Katsushika Hokusai turned the emphasis of ukiyo-e to materiality and bodily experiences of everyday life throughout his career, in which he also developed manga as a new genre. The term manga could be literally understood as "playful sketch", and as we could see from the Hokusai Manga, his subjects include so many bodily motions, exaggerated faces distorted by different emotions, and body transformations through labouring and resting. Although these images look dramatic, Hokusai's aim was always to "depict life as it is". Kuniyoshi was also fascinated with scenes from the townspeople's everyday world and left many works with the spirit of manga. He did several caricatures of kabuki actors even during the Tenpō reform and posted a ban on kabuki posters. The following Figure 4, titled *Scribblings on The Storehouse Wall*, could be seen as a facetious disclaimer that he was merely copying graffiti on the wall, not presenting new designs of these actors with whom he captured the essence of minimal lines. He created even more animated versions of these paintings by using his favourite animal cat as a substitute, which is a very clever way to circumvent censorship while ridiculing the uptightness of the shogunate.

When seeing these assembled portraits of kabuki actors, it is evident that Kuniyoshi adopted the traditional composition of ukiyo-e portrait, favouring asymmetry. The vast, down-hanging nose is virtually the visual centre of this picture, and Kuniyoshi placed a butt to accentuate it. It could be interpreted as a mockery of the governmental restriction on erotica at that time, as it also accounts for the deliberate use of male nudity. As an artist who created erotica, Kuniyoshi followed the Japanese tradition when employing nudity. In her study of erotic art in the Tokugawa era, Rachael Redjou notes that, unlike most western classical paintings, it had been challenging to determine the gender of the characters based on their bodies in Japanese art ever since the 17th century: "there historically

was no artistic drive to depict the ‘perfect’ male or female body in Japan. This meant the primary focus was not on secondary sexual characteristics such as muscles and broad shoulders for men or rounder shoulders and hips for women. Rather, faces, arms, legs, and torsos were often drawn comparably, creating similarly constructed lovers. Additionally, naked bodies in Japan were not inherently sexualized as public nudity, particularly in bathhouses, would have been common during this time" [6]. The subtle ambivalence in males' nudity is a massive part of Kuniyoshi's ingenious sarcasm.



Figure 5: *Scribbles on The Storehouse Wall (Nitakaragura kabe no mudagaki)*, Utagawa Kuniyoshi, 1843–47.

Despite the uncanniness perceived from the visual impact of disproportionate features, these pictures nonetheless contain a sense of ambivalence built through details of colours and patterns. We notice that the colour palettes and patterns did not abnegate the visually pleasing, decorative side of ukiyo-e. The colour palettes Kuniyoshi chose for the yose-e series are drastically from those in his depiction of warriors and legends, which contains stronger political connotations. In his two famous triptychs depicting legendary fights between human heroes and monsters/ghosts, Takiyasha the Witch and the Skeleton Spectre and *The Earth Spider Slain by Raikō's Retainers*, the colour black became the keynote of the background as he spares no effort to accentuate the gigantic, grotesque bodies of monsters in contrast with the reddened muscle of the thewy heroes. The bodily movements of humans were rendered ferocious and dynamic but not in any way distorted and unnatural. Kuniyoshi's grasp of ukiyo-e's different genres was always precise, for he could be very perceptive towards his audience's needs.

The same can also apply to his bijin-ga series. Figure 6 below is from his bijin-ga series *Sankai Medetai Zue* 山海目出度図絵 (*Celebrated Treasures of Mountains and Seas*), which is a playful rendition of previously famous landscapes paintings by illustrating female beauties of different classes and occupations about each scenery. Putting Figure 6 and the previous Figure 2 together, a strong influence of traditional bijin-ga in the painting of a woman is traceable. The bodies that form the features of the women are a lot less exaggerated than the man's, so she is closer to the formalized depiction of beauty in bijin-ga than the manga way of depicting life as it is. The highest point of the portrait starts with the blue hairpin made of bamboo sticking prominently out of her hair, and the top of which is a small red lantern as the accessory, symbolizing the nightlife in Yoshiwara. The red hair

band lining of their two beauties' kimonos and the way they are hanging down their necks and showing their back are other direct connections with the geisha world. All these elements show how Kuniyoshi purposefully balanced the ornamental value of his yose-e designs, differentiating them from his more grotesque works and his contemporary's, which in a sense, required yose-e to reflect less on the harsh reality.



Figure 6: Totomi 遠江 / Sankai medetai zue 山海目出度図絵 (Celebrated Treasures of Mountains and Seas), Utagawa Kuniyoshi. 1852

4. Aesthetics Born in Secular Life—Contextualizing Iki and Tsu in Late Edo

The indispensable theoretical structures behind these playful images are the ever-evolving Japanese aesthetics of *iki* and *tsu*, both born in the Edo period. Compared to other traditional Japanese aesthetics, *iki* originated from the class of merchants, as it refers to an ideal of taste and stylishness that is very often based on a carefree attitude toward wealth. In a sense, the acting of *iki* could be parallel with the concept of "effortless chic", for it was considered as embodied in stylishness and sexiness demonstrated in a simple, low-key, implicit way. According to Kuki Shuzo's 1930 analysis, *The Structure of Iki*, *iki* could be broken down into three moments: *bitai* (coquetry), *ikiji* (pride and honour), and *akirame* (resignation) [7]. Although these elements are majorly associated with romantic encounters, all three layers are essentially about the way with people, a universal sense of sophistication but never losing one's pride. The concept of *tsu*, on the other hand, refers to a highly cultivated but not necessarily solemn sensibility, in other words, a playful sensitivity. In Kuniyoshi's humorous parody of government restrictions and the conventional *ukiyo-e*, we can see the traces of his sensitivity to people.

Like Kuniyoshi, many *ukiyo-e* painters came from the grassroots, and their audience was also mostly ordinary citizens and labourers without so many pursuits in the so-called "high culture". Although there were educated merchants, in general, it was still a low-culture group, which was essentially different from the audience of the court nobility in the past when medieval aesthetics like *mono no aware* and *miyabi* were deemed the highest form of beauty. This fundamentally differentiates *ukiyo-e* from other traditional Japanese paintings (*yamato-e* as one example), favouring the secular life from the choice of subjects to its forms of expression. Although the commoners in the Edo period had sufficient economic power, the warrior class adopted a high-handed policy to maintain their rule, which led to this "twist" in the oppressed expression of civic culture. Edo art thus took on a different style and character from traditional art. This change was not simply through replacing the subject of painting from the divine and the nobles with citizens, but a more conceptual shift from the

ideal of the spiritual and the afterlife to the focus on the present world.

5. Conclusion

By turning its attention to the lower classes and expressing their joys and sorrows, ukiyo-e's emergence represented a fundamental change in the aesthetic orientation of Japanese art. The asceticism of Zen Buddhism signifies the pleasure of the "present surpassed the past, the vision of the "afterlife"". The Shinto tradition in Japan's native culture requires faithfulness to the feelings and emotions of the heart, which gave rise to the aesthetics of *mono no aware*, and its legacy was integrated into ukiyo-e sensibility. It was so close to the reality of "a life of pleasure", with expressions and cultural atmospheres that all revealed the open sexual consciousness in Edo society. Ukiyo-e's ambivalence is expressed through playfulness, and the grotesque speaks to ordinary people's pleasure and anger after they acquire the ability to produce and consume culture. In this sense, ukiyo-e shaped Japanese civilian history, as it contributed to the pleasure of secular life on multifaceted levels essentialized by *iki*, which, in return, stimulated social production and added to the profound dimensions of *iki* experience.

For the people of Edo, the world of the Yoshiwara and Kabuki stars was a concrete form of *iki* beauty, and it became an inexhaustible source for Ukiyo-e. Like a mirror reflecting the endless variability of Edo people's life, ukiyo-e could be dark and grotesque sometimes, while it could also be witty and playful. Kuniyoshi's *yose-e* shows how ukiyo-e has a metaphorical nature and is always filled with hidden elements and associations deeply rooted in Edo's folk culture, which is precisely why it won the heart of the grassroots. Ukiyo-e is not just a genre of beautiful ornamental designs but essentially a perfect embodiment of the Edo aesthetic *iki* and *tsu*: a sagacity of "street smart", sophistication, and the persistence of a truthful life.

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