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Women in *shunga*: Questions of Objectification and Equality

Abstract

The objectification of women in art and pornography is often seen as harmful. However, Martha Nussbaum's articulation of seven types of objectification shows how it can be benign or positive depending on the context. This paper utilizes Nussbaum's ideas to examine the objectification of women depicted in *shunga*, sexually explicit art created in 17th-19th century Japan, and how it differs from European art of the same period. It also explores related issues of equality, sexuality, and agency.

Keywords

Shunga, Sex, Art, Feminism, Objectification

'Lascivious pictures' was how *shunga*, sexually explicit Japanese art, brought to London in 1614 were categorized and, as such, they were confiscated and destroyed.[1] European attitudes towards *shunga* have changed significantly over subsequent centuries, but depictions relating to sex and sexuality are still the subject of debate. In *Eroticism and Art*, which analyses historic and contemporary works, art historian Alyce Mahon states that: "If we are to assess sexually explicit art critically—rather than merely react to it—then we must look to its social, historical and political contexts, its artistic intent, and its popular and critical reception" (2007, 16). This paper aims to follow Mahon's approach by drawing on and expanding my previous research

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[1] For details see Screech 2005.

on the history and reception of *shunga* (Boyd 2016). To gauge modern responses to *shunga*, which was mostly created in the Edo period (1603–1868), I carried out questionnaires with over 200 visitors to the British Museum's *Shunga: Sex and Pleasure in Japanese Art* exhibition, 3 October 2013–5 January 2014. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive and reflected a high level of audience engagement. Notably, visitors frequently commented on the apparent gender equality and mutual pleasure shown in *shunga*, often with the implication that this differed from the depiction of women as passive objects of the male gaze as in most European art of the same period. Although those comments may reflect more on modern notions about art, pornography, and Japan than Edo-period ones, they raised questions that I want to explore further. Therefore, this paper considers the modern concepts of objectification and equality in relation to the depiction of women in 17th–19th century *shunga*. It is not intended to provide conclusive answers, but rather to engage with and contribute to on-going dialogues in various fields.

Firstly, finding appropriate terms to discuss *shunga* can be challenging since sexually explicit art is a polemical subject. *Shunga* is often labelled as 'erotic art' or 'pornography.' Discussions about objectification often center on the depiction of women in art and pornography and how this is 'harmful.'[2] Therefore, before addressing the issue of objectification, I will foreground some of the connotations of 'pornography' to show how translating or defining *shunga* in this way impacts on viewers' reception and understanding of *shunga*.

Secondly, Martha Nussbaum's classifications of objectification (1995) will be utilized to query to what extent women were objectified in *shunga*. Certain features of *shunga*, such as partial concealment of bodies, exaggeration of genitals, and the use of text, will be discussed to show how they affect perceptions of objectification.

Thirdly, the emphasis on mutual pleasure and the apparent equality between men and women in *shunga* will be examined to demonstrate how this can obfuscate notions of objectification. Equality is complex, but it is being treated here as a cluster term which can include some of the following and more: both people (and their feelings and experiences) matter; both have agency; both have a voice; both are treated as *people* and not just as things. To what extent depictions in *shunga* reflect gender (in)equality in Edo society will be considered, particularly attitudes towards sexuality.

[2] Dworkin, MacKinnon 1988; Haslanger 2012; Langton 2009; Mikkola 2019.

Finally, women's agency in *shunga* and the notion of consent in the Edo period will be questioned. Scenes of coercion are infrequent in *shunga*; however, as will be shown, the concept of choice in relation to sex was problematized by women's status in a patriarchal and highly structured society.

Defining *Shunga*: Sex, Art and Pornography

During the Edo period the production and dissemination of *shunga*, sexually explicit prints, paintings, and illustrated books, was acceptable in Japan in a way in which it was not in Europe at that time. Sex was a common theme, especially for artists of the popular *ukiyo-e* (pictures of the floating world) school including Suzuki Harunobu (1725–1770), Kitagawa Utamaro (1753?–1806), and Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849).

For simplicity, *shunga* is the most commonly used term nowadays, both within Japan and internationally. However, in the Edo period various terms were used (see Smith 1996) and these reflect the range of roles that *shunga* could fulfil. The uses for *shunga* varied over time and from viewer to viewer due to factors such as gender, status, sexuality, experience, or mood. As well as being art, *shunga* could also be used as pornography, for humor, seduction, economic purposes, or (as some claimed) for education or protection (see Boyd 2016, 65-72).

The literal translation of '*shunga*' is 'spring pictures,' however it is often defined as 'erotic art' or 'pornography.' To avoid the connotations and judgement implicit in these terms, I prefer the term 'sex-art,' as proposed by Tim Clark (2010). 'Sex-art' is more useful because it denotes the subject matter regardless of intention, reception or level of explicitness, and does not indicate a moral judgement. Like religious art, landscape or portraiture, the term 'sex-art' denotes a genre but not the form, style, or attitude towards the subject depicted. 'Sex-art' is a descriptive, but value neutral, term, which allows for the positive and aesthetic qualities of *shunga*. Author Peter Webb notes "The vast majority of sexually explicit works of art are produced as part of an overall desire to express the totality of human experience; very few artists have made sex their only motivation" (1983, 5). Additionally, as Ferdinand Bertholet, a collector of sexually explicit art from China and Japan, explains "They express a poetry that enriches human existence and brings the past to life" (2003, 52).

In contrast to the typical negative implications, in this paper 'pornography' will be used as a value neutral term based on Bernard Williams' definition of pornography as works which contain sexually explicit representa-

tions *and* have the function or intention of arousing (1980, 103). Pornography will be engaged with for two reasons. One, many discussions about objectification, particularly from feminist perspectives, focus on pornography as a central issue. Two, despite fervent debates in the field of aesthetics about whether pornography and art are mutually exclusive categories[3], it was not an issue for visitors to the *Shunga* exhibition. Visitors referred to *shunga* and other sexually explicit works as art *and* as pornography; for them these terms are compatible.

Some may dispute the appropriateness of using modern concepts to discuss Edo-period art.[4] However, whilst the term pornography is relatively recent, objects which were used for the same purposes existed in prior centuries. In the 17th–19th centuries, *shunga* fulfilled similar functions to modern pornography as it was used for arousal and masturbation. On the influence of modern concepts on the reception of *shunga*, Rosina Buckland notes "It is sometimes mistakenly believed, perhaps influenced by tendencies of Western pornography, that *shunga* depict male enjoyment and female submission" (2010, 39). This is significant because there have been several notable *shunga* exhibitions in Europe and America[5] in the past few decades resulting in an increasing contemporary audience engaging with *shunga*, who unavoidably bring modern 'Western' notions such as pornography and feminism with them. Furthermore, the depiction and treatment of women has long been a topic of debate for feminists and for others before the term feminism was coined.

The assumption that pornography is inherently bad or harmful is at the center of moral objections. Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin claim that pornography degrades and demeans women by objectifying them. In their anti-pornography legislation for Minneapolis in 1984, they defined pornography as being sexually explicit *and* including some form of violence, subordination, objectification, or humiliation of women (Dworkin, MacKinnon 1988). Similarly, Gloria Steinem and Mahon argue that pornography is about male power over women whereas the erotic, whilst still sexually explicit, is about equality, both heterosexual and homosexual (Steinem 1980, 129-130; Mahon 2007, 15).

[3] See Kieran 2001; Maes 2011; 2017; Maes, Levinson 2012; Mag Uidhir 2009.

[4] Pandey addresses this issue in relation to Heian period literature (2016, 1-7).

[5] Key exhibitions were held at Helsinki City Art Museum (Hayakawa *et al*. 2002; Shirakura, Hayakawa 2003); Kunsthal, Rotterdam (Uhlenbeck, Winkel 2005); the British Museum, London (Clark *et al*. 2013) and Honolulu Museum of Art (Eichman, Salel 2014). For overviews and information on *shunga* exhibitions see Ishigami 2015; Boyd 2016, 158-195.

Although Theodore Gracyk agrees that most pornography does objectify and demean woman, as Dworkin and MacKinnon assert, he claims their definition "fails because it overly simplifies pornography as a certain content" (1987, 104). Instead, he proposes the term 'pornographic attitude.' Gracyk clarifies that not *all* pornography has the pornographic attitude, but it is "singled out because it provides a highly visible example of the mistreatment of women. […] A degrading attitude can and does occur in representations which are not sexually explicit […] The pornographic attitude can be found in any number of representations or images that express contempt for women as sexually autonomous, equal persons" (1987, 115).

Similarly, Mahlet Zimeta posits that 'pornography' is used as a collective term for a variety of negative issues which occur across many different aspects of society and that pornography is a symptom of society's problems (2011). She points out that the objectionable aspects of pornography, namely dehumanization, objectification, exploitation, and invasion of privacy, can all be found in acknowledged and celebrated works of art and literature, so these cannot be why pornography is problematic. Neither is it necessarily the sexual content that people object to, which can also be found in art and literature, but rather how pornography deals with it. 'Pornography,' in this sense, is not an object but a name given to an argument. To differentiate, 'pornographic attitude' will be used for works which objectify or degrade, negative aspects which are present in society in general and although commonly found in pornography are not specific to pornography. Not all pornography will necessarily display the pornographic attitude. In contrast, some sex art may objectify and degrade women, and therefore will display the pornographic attitude.

Objectification

Although feminism represents a plurality of voices rather than a homogeneous point of view, one prominent notion, as voiced by anti-porn campaigners MacKinnon and Dworkin (1988), is that pornography objectifies women and consequently is fundamentally harmful. On the other hand, anti-censorship and sex-positive feminists, such as Gayle Rubin (2011), believe that pornography is not inherently detrimental to women. Philosopher Martha Nussbaum specifies seven ways people can be objectified—treated as things—and how these *may* cause harm (1995, 256-265). She concludes that the context of the relationship is fundamental for determining whether objectification is benign or, as is more often the case, negative. For Nussbaum,

people are objectified when they are treated as a tool (instrumentalization), as lacking in autonomy and self-determination, as lacking in agency (inertness), as interchangeable (fungibility), as lacking in boundary-integrity (violability), as something that can be bought or sold (ownership), and as lacking experience or feelings (denial of subjectivity).[6] She calls these "signposts of what many have found morally problematic" and explains that objectification is a "loose cluster-term, for whose application we sometimes treat any one of these features as sufficient, though more often a plurality of features is present when the term is applied" (Nussbaum 1995, 258).

Fig. 1. *Negai no itoguchi* (*Threads leading to desire*), no. 9, Kitagawa Utamaro, 1799.

Source: The British Museum.

Sex was largely absent from 18th- and 19th-century European art other than in implicit ways, such as the genre of the nude, which presented women as objects for the male gaze.[7] Discussions about the nude in art overlap with discussions on *shunga*. Indeed, in the Meiji era (1868–1912) the nude seems

[6] Langton adds three more features—reduction to body, reduction to appearance, and silencing (2009, 228-231).

[7] The terms 'nude' and 'naked,' particularly in relation to 'natural' and 'erotic,' have been contradictorily defined in art history, notably by Kenneth Clark (1956) and John Berger (1972).

to have been conflated with *shunga* in both legal and unofficial censorship. However, in contrast to the Christian values of Europe, in Edo-Japan nudity and sex were not inherently shameful due to differences in religious attitudes and a history of communal bathing.[8] It may therefore be surprising that the nude was not a genre in Edo-period art. Although *abuna-e* ('danger pictures,' risqué but non-explicit works) and bathing scenes could feature nudity, nudity in and of itself was not erotic. Apart from the attractiveness conferred on the nape of a woman's neck "*shunga* dismiss the erotic possibility of skin" (Screech 2009, 109).

Even in *shunga*, couples' bodies are often partially concealed rather than completely exposed, usually with the genitals visible for emphasis, as in fig. 1. The exaggerated size of the genitals also helps to draw attention to the *raison d'être* of *shunga* and symbolizes the strength of passion involved. This partial concealment, as well as potentially tantalizing the viewer and focusing their attention, uses clothing to frame and visually fragment bodies. This could be seen as visual violability: objectifying by segmenting and reducing people down to body parts, instrumentalizing their genitals as tools to be used.

Fig. 2. *Ehon warai jogo* (*The Laughing Drinker*), vol. 3, Kitagawa Utamaro, c. 1803.

Source: The British Museum.

[8] See Pandey (2016) for a discussion of nudity and nakedness in pre-modern Japan.

However, for Nussbaum "the kind of apparent fungibility that is involved in identifying persons with parts of their bodies need not be not dehumanizing at all, but can coexist with an intense regard for the person's individuality, which can even be expressed in a personalizing and individualizing of the bodily organs themselves" (1995, 276). At the end of each of the three volumes of *Ehon warai jogo*, fig. 2, Utamaro portrayed a close-up of female sexual organs corresponding to the face of the woman on the first page and depicted each with their own characteristics. Although it is arguable that the women are types, Utamaro has attempted to individualize them for the viewer.

Similarly, in *Takara awase* (*Treasure competition*), c.1826, Kunisada humorously depicted Kabuki actors' penises personalized with the dramatic make up or hairstyle each was known for. Nussbaum's observation that "the genital organs of people are not really fungible, but have their own individual character, and are in effect parts of the person, if one will really look at them closely without shame" (1995, 276) corresponds with attitudes towards genitals in *shunga*, where they are shown individualized, in detail and without shame.

In *shunga*, genitals were often shown the same size as the lovers' heads. The equality of size and of pictorial focus on faces as well as genitals suggests that the mental and emotional aspects of sex were as important as the physical ones. This seems to encourage contradictorily both objectification and subjectivity. Of the seven aspects of objectification, Nussbaum identifies instrumentality as "the most morally exigent notion" (1995, 271). Indeed, instrumentalization, the reduction of women to objects, to their appearance, to body parts, to tools to be used, is the aspect most strongly associated with the term 'objectification.' Instrumentalization is seen as harmful because it strips women of their humanity.

Pornographic interest is often taken to mean objectification and dehumanization, and being "uninterested in the first-person perspective of the subject *represented*" (Kieran 2001, 42). However, Mathew Kieran argues that an interest in the subject is necessary for arousal (2001, 43). This is presumably one reason why in *shunga* the viewer is usually presented with a situation and characterization not just naked bodies without context. Moreover, in *shunga*, rather than objectifying women by denying their subjectivity, identification seems to be encouraged and subjectivity is emphasized, with the emotional experience of the participants conveyed through the focus on their facial expressions and gestures of pleasure, as in fig. 3.

Fig. 3. *Utamakura* (*Poem of the Pillow*), no. 3, Kitagawa Utamaro, 1788.

Source: The British Museum.

Clothing, hairstyles and make up are often regarded as a form of instrumentalization; used to reduce women to their body or appearance. Rajyashree Pandey examines the eroticism of clothing in 10th–14th century Japanese art and literature and notes that "clothes are inseparably aligned with the body and the self" (2016, 37). In Edo-period art, clothes and personal appearance can indicate marital and class status, employment, personal style, or age, and in this way serve as reminders of the person as being an individual and not just a body. For example, in fig. 3 the woman's shaved eyebrows indicate that she is married. In *shunga*, these indicators of personal detail can enable viewers to contextualize the lovers and possibly identify with them.

This subjectivity and individualization in *shunga* seem to equate with what Nussbaum calls 'narrative history' and may help to prevent or counteract the instrumentalization and fungibility that is arguably present. Nussbaum asks, "in the absence of any narrative history with the person, how can desire attend to anything else but the incidental, and how can one do more than use the body of the other as a tool of one's own states?" (1995, 287). In *shunga* narrative history can be implied by individualization, but it can also be seen in the couples' surroundings, which gives a context for their intimacy, and it is sometimes literally provided by text within the image.

Shunga often include snippets of dialogue, giving the women depicted a voice—they are not just body parts but active, thinking, feeling, speaking beings. Through speech, women can express themselves and their subjectivity just as men in *shunga* can. Although text in *shunga* can be witty, or give information about the participants, it is also frequently 'dirty talk' and sounds of pleasure, for example the dialogue in Katsukawa Shuncho's album *Koshoku zue juni ko* (*Erotic Pictures for the Twelve Months*), c. 1788. Regardless of the content, text allows couples to articulate their subjectivity and express their pleasure. This focus on the emotional aspects of a physical act allows viewers to connect with the participants, and establishes a balance of people being depicted as both physical and mental at the same time, avoiding the reduction of women to the physical as in much of European art, particularly nudes. European paintings did not include text, other than perhaps the title given to a work, and so the women depicted could not voice their sexual experiences.

The inclusion of text in *shunga* was another way to show communication and intimacy between the couple, their engagement and relationship to each other. For Nussbaum objectification can be neutral or positive due to respect and consent, she elucidates: "the difference between an objectionable and a benign use of objectification will be made by the overall context of the human relationship" (1995, 271). This type of contextualization or narrative history is a way of showing these qualities and is a key difference between the way women are objectified in *shunga* and in other art and pornography. The human relationship is often lacking in European nudes and erotic art: in nudes women tend to be on their own rather than engaging with a partner and in erotic art contextual elements are usually used to depict women as goddesses or mythological figures rather than as human beings. Even when women are depicted as human beings, as individuals, their subjectivity is denied: they are not permitted to express pleasure, and clothing and other status indicators seem to be included to invite judgment and criticism rather than to give a sense of a woman's individuality.

An example of objectionable objectification can be seen in a large oil painting of Venus and Cupid, fig. 4, on which John Berger comments, "the way their bodies are arranged have nothing to do with them kissing. Her body has been contorted to present itself to the male viewer of the painting. The picture appeals to his sexuality, it has nothing to do with hers" (1972, 6). This instrumentalization, turning Venus into a body on display, as an object to be used to satisfy male desires, and the denial of her subjectivity is typical of the objectification of women in European art of this period. Yet, in *shunga*

contorted positions served other purposes, such as denoting the lovers' passion, drawing focus to their genitals, adding a touch of humor or displaying variety. Edo audiences loved novelty, and artists were always striving to provide them with something new or unusual. *Shunga* usually portrayed people as individualized human beings rather than as gods or allegories like Venus and Cupid, including husbands and wives, secret lovers, adulterers, young and old couples. Additionally, in *shunga* the focus is equally on men's bodies as it is on women's and, although it was created by male artists, it was bought and consumed by men and women. However, even if women and men are shown as equals in *shunga*, this should not be interpreted as an accurate reflection of relationships within Edo society.

Fig. 4. *An Allegory with Venus and Cupid*, Bronzino, c. 1545.

Source: National Gallery, London.

Gender Equality

In *shunga* women are shown as equal in the sense that they appear to have agency and are being treated as people whose experiences and feelings matter as much as their male partner's. Most notably, women's enjoyment is depicted as being as important as men's. Signs of female pleasure include curled toes, closed eyes, head thrown back, disheveled hair and the emission of sexual fluids, as in figs. 3 and 5. Berger explains the "European convention, of not painting body hair on women […] because hair suggests power and passion, and the male spectator must feel these are his characteristics" (1972, 6). In contrast, in *shunga* there is plenty of body hair and passion on display by women as well as men.

Fig. 5. *Ehon tsuhi no hinagata* (*Model couples*), Katsushika Hokusai, c. 1812.

Source: The British Museum.

Was the depiction of women as equal and enthusiastic participants in sex an acknowledgment of women's agency and sexual desires? *Shunga*, like all artworks, are not documents, but if taken in context with other sources they can be used to learn more. Even though the focus on equality and mutual pleasure was not a reflection of society in the Edo period, the fact that male

artists continually depicted it in *shunga* shows that it was significant, nonetheless. As philosopher Rae Langton has noted, the desire for mutuality is "central to sexual life" (2009, 252).

Pornography is often said to be a 'bad influence' on men, in that the negative aspects of objectification—namely instrumentalization, fungibility and ownership—prevalent in the pornographic attitude encourages the (assumed) male viewers to treat real women in the same way. However, might the opposite be possible with *shunga*? Although it is not a simple matter of cause and effect, art can positively influence viewers.[9] Could *shunga* color people's views of real relationships in a positive way by depicting women as equals, with agency and subjectivity, rather than as objects?

On the other hand, it could be argued that despite the prominence given to the depiction of mutual enjoyment in *shunga*, some men were not so much interested in giving a woman pleasure as it was to feed their own egos. Male viewers would want to be able to identify with the man in the image; hence the surrogate man should be depicted as a good lover, as the viewer would imagine himself to be. Furthermore, a woman who looks uninterested and unaroused would not be appealing (to most) and could prevent men from projecting themselves into an image. If mutual pleasure is an illusion, it is one that is necessary for *shunga* to function as pornography.[10]

Nevertheless, *shunga* was used by men and women therefore it is possible that the depiction of mutual enjoyment is not solely for the benefit of male viewers. Instead of denying subjectivity, *shunga* encouraged it and women are shown experiencing agency and pleasure, perhaps to allow female viewers to identify with or project themselves into the image, in the same way that male viewers are assumed to do.

There is the possibility that sex was more egalitarian than is assumed from a modern perspective. In Japan, influenced by Chinese Confucianism, social harmony and balance between *yin* and *yang*, female and male aspects respectively, were important. On the other hand, as Ellis Tinois notes "In Edo-period Japan status inequality was regarded as an inescapable feature of all sexual relationships: the [male] youth was subordinate to and receptive of the man just as the woman was expected to be subordinate to and receptive of the man" (2005, 32). However, it should be remembered that hierarchies permeated Japanese culture in all aspects of daily life including work and family relationships, and not just sexual ones.

[9] See Maes (2017) for a discussion of this.

[10] See Langton (2019, 223-240) for her thought-provoking argument on how the affirmation of women's autonomy can actually deny or violate that autonomy.

Sexuality and Equality

Sexuality is one area that undermines women's apparent equality in *shunga*. Male–female relationships were referred to as *nyoshoku* (lust for women or female love), which demonstrates the dominance of the male viewpoint in Edo society. Male–male relationships, referred to as *nanshoku* (male love), were common, however there was no term for female same-sex relationships. Depictions of female–female sex are rare, which is notable in contrast to the sizable quantity of extant male–male *shunga*. Although female–female sex was largely omitted from art , it does not mean that it did not occur, and this raises questions about *shunga*'s audiences. The lack of female–female *shunga* indicates that non-heteronormative female viewers were not catered to and this, in turn, raises the possibility that in general female viewers of *shunga* were not considered either.

Fig. 6. Scene from *Fumi no kiyogaki* (*Clean draft of a love letter*), Chokyosai Eiri, 1801.

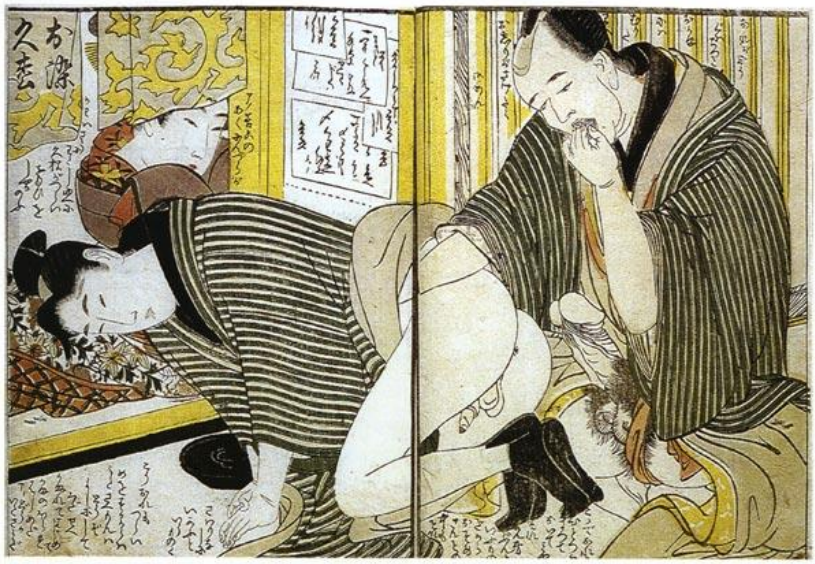
Source: The British Museum.

Alternatively, since female–female *shunga* was lacking, could depictions of women masturbating, fig. 6, have been created for female same-sex fantasies? They may represent genuine expressions of female sexual desires, but given the lack of focus on female sexuality, other than as a partner for men, it is likely that they were designed to satisfy male sexual desires and

instrumentalize women as objects to be consumed by the male gaze, as fig. 6 makes clear. However, if women masturbating were intended to titillate male viewers rather than for women to identify with or fantasize over, why are there not more depictions of female–female sex in *shunga*? Perhaps depictions of female–female sexual relations would have removed the opportunity for men to project themselves into the picture. Arguably the use of a sex toy could provide male viewers a way to 'step into' the picture, but it would involve men instrumentalizing themselves as being fungible in order to do so, which is unlikely.

Some men preferred male–male relationships and others male–female but in the Edo period these were not considered mutually exclusive and there was a fluidity of sexuality that allowed for participation in both.[11] For instance, there are numerous *shunga* examples of an older man penetrating a male youth whilst embracing a woman. However, sexual freedom seems to have been restricted to men as even when multiple women are depicted in *shunga*, they focus their attention on the man rather than interacting with each other.

Fig.7. *Nanshoku* or male–male scene, Kitagawa Utamaro, late 18th century.



Source: Ferdinand M. Bertholet collection.

[11] *Wakashu* (attractive, androgynous male youths) are sometimes considered a third gender, for more see Mostow et al. 2016 and Salel 2013. *Onnagata* (male actors specialising in female roles) also blurred gender categories.

It could be argued that *nanshoku* was given the same status as *nyoshoku* as male–male scenes were included with male–female ones in *shunga* sets, scrolls, and illustrated books. Furthermore, there were no artistic distinctions in the way male–male and male–female couples were depicted. However, equality was not represented within *nanshoku shunga*, which always involved a dominant older male and a subordinate youth, who was often depicted with a small[12] or flaccid penis, as in fig. 7. Unlike in other *shunga*, in male–male scenes mutual pleasure seems to be lacking, as Tinios notes: "The younger partner was not expected to derive pleasure from being penetrated" (2005, 32). In contrast to the small penis of penetrated youths, vaginas in *shunga* were enlarged to match the oversized penises of their partners giving the impression of equality between men and women. By matching the size and power of their genitals, women were depicted as equal participants in contrast to the power and age imbalance present in male–male *shunga*.

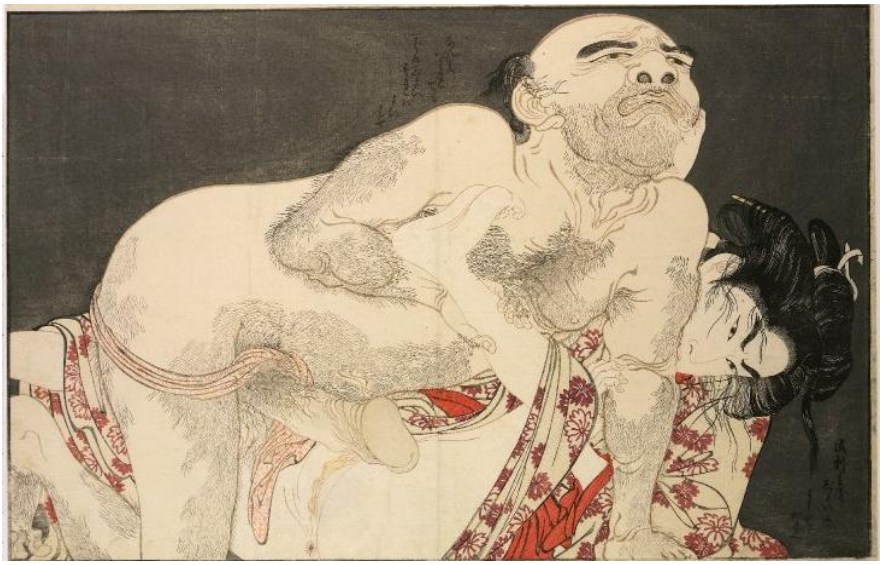
Agency and Consent

Consent is a key moral concern in relation to pornography. The focus of pornography is sex, but MacKinnon, and many others, conflate pornography with violence against women and rape. They argue that pornography teaches viewers that women should be, and want to be, objectified and used (Dworkin, MacKinnon 1988). The majority of *shunga* differs in its depictions of women from the stereotypes of pornography—or the pornographic attitude—to suggest that this is not the case. Usually, women in *shunga* are shown enjoying sex as active, autonomous participants rather than as objects being used and, crucially, when women have not consented their objections are made clear.

Despite the emphasis on mutual enjoyment, there were depictions of sexual aggression and rape in *shunga*. In scenes of coercion men are usually depicted as hairy and ugly as if the repulsiveness of their intentions manifests itself visibly, as though artists were judging men who forced themselves on women. For instance, through the character of Mane'emon, Harunobu expresses disgust at the calligraphy teacher forcing himself on his young pupil, and voices a preference for harmony in male–female relations (see Hayakawa 2001, 22-24). In non-consensual situations, women are not shown as victims or as inert objects, instead they retain agency by physically and verbally resisting, such as the woman in fig. 8 who struggles whilst exclaiming "Let go of me Rihei, you old fool!"

[12] In Haranobu's *nanshoku shunga* both men are usually shown with small, unexaggerated genitals.

Fig. 8. *Utamakura* (*Poem of the Pillow*), no. 9, Kitagawa Utamaro, 1788.



Source: The British Museum.

Notions of consent are particularly problematic in relation to courtesans and are too complex to explore fully here but shall be briefly raised. To talk of choice or consent in relation to the women who worked in the legalized brothel districts is grossly misleading; courtesans were indentured sex-workers who were sold to brothels, usually as children. The customs of the so-called pleasure quarters appeared to give women of higher ranks a degree of autonomy and agency, and these along with the illusions of glamour and status of courtesans in art conceal the grim reality of women as possessions that could be bought and used as sexual objects.

Courtesans were a popular subject in art, and sex was part of their role. Consequently, there is a common misconception that *shunga* mainly depict courtesans and their clients, but the majority of *shunga* depicts 'ordinary' people. Significantly, when courtesans are shown having sex it is often with their secret lover rather than a client. Perhaps this romanticization is a way of circumventing the ethical issues inherent in sex-work by giving courtesans a semblance of choice and autonomy. This in turn may allow viewers to enjoy depictions of courtesans without having to address the accompanying moral concerns.

Although in Edo society women were not owned by their husbands (unlike in Europe where marriage was a form of ownership), they still lacked self-determination and autonomy due to the Confucian-based ideal that a woman must first obey her father, then her husband, and if widowed her son[13]. Due to this patriarchal structure, there was a power inequality in Edo marriages.

Fig. 9. *Fūryū enshoku Mane'emon* (*The Amorous Adventures of Mane'emon*), no. 10, Suzuki Harunobu, 1765–1770.

Source: Museum of Fine Art, Boston.

In *shunga*, women are often shown being interrupted by their husbands for sex whilst doing housework, breastfeeding, or at their toilette. Although *shunga* are not documents and should not be treated as fact, it would be reasonable to assume that given how frequently these kind of sex scenes occur that situations like these were not too far removed from reality. However, it is debatable whether women were acting on their own sexual urges

[13] For more on women's role in marriage and family relationships in Edo Japan see Berry & Yonemoto 2019.

and were willing to have sex at any moment or, because society forced them to be subordinate to their husbands, they lacked a choice in the matter. For example, fig. 9 shows a woman trying to push her husband away and her dialogue emphasizes her reluctance to 'do it in front of the silkworms' (see Hayakawa 2001, 42). It is interesting to note that in many examples of what I term 'domestic interruption' *shunga*, one or both of the woman's hands are already occupied by her task, as in fig. 10, giving her no option to physically prevent her husband's sexual advances if they are unwelcome.

Fig. 10. *Komachi-biki* (*Tugging Komachi*), no.12, Kitagawa Utamaro, 1802.

Source: The British Museum.

At a time when marriages were frequently arranged for practical reasons—strengthening political or business relationships—rather than for love, it is plausible that many women would have had sex out of marital duty rather than choice. It could be said that choice and true consent was as lacking for women in domestic sex as it was for sex workers in the brothel districts.

Conclusion

This paper has considered some aspects of the vast and complex issues of objectification and equality in relation to women in *shunga*. Although there are inequalities relating to gender and sexuality, the use of context, narrative and individualization, as seen in specific works and as general characteristics of *shunga*, helps to avoid or mitigate some of the negative aspects associated with pornography such as instrumentalization and fungibility. In contrast to much of European art and pornography, *shunga* tends to show women as people with agency and subjectivity. In this way, *shunga* features less of the harmful objectification that anti-porn feminists associate with pornography. *Shunga* does not inherently objectify women, although it can and at times does. But it does so to a lesser or less harmful extent than is usually expected from the term 'pornography.'

Due to multiple viewpoints and experiences dependent on gender, age, class, and sexuality, as well as geographic and historical distance, there is no verifiable 'reality' of sex or gender relations in Edo Japan. Nevertheless, insights into Edo society and its attitudes to women may be gained by questioning *shunga*. If equality and mutual pleasure existed only in *shunga*, why did artists choose to frequently present those particular illusions and why did viewers connect with them? The answers to these questions might suggest why *shunga*, and the perception that they emphasize women's pleasure and equality, continue to fascinate modern-day viewers.

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