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Reading *The Mirror of Yoshiwara Beauties, Compared* in Context
Julie Davis, University of Pennsylvania
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Abstract:

In 1776 publishers Tsutaya Jūzaburō and Yamazaki Kinbei issued *The Mirror of Yoshiwara Beauties, Compared* with sumptuous illustrations by two leading painters, Kitao Shigemasa and Katsukawa Shunshō. This three-volume album exploited the technology of multiple woodblock printing to represent the glamorous “beauties” of the licensed pleasure district, the Yoshiwara, in full color for the “floating world” (ukiyo). In this presentation I offer a new interpretation of this illustrated book by returning the album to its period context. By looking closely at this book as a collaboration of publishers, artists, block carvers, and printers, I will examine how their contributions are both visible and hidden in the final work and how the work benefited from their cooperative enterprise. I will also demonstrate how the unnamed patrons are indicated through the book’s representational strategies and how this work thus replicates their purpose to promote the licensed district as a place of refined entertainments. By reading the album against guidebooks to the district, as period readers would have, this talk further addresses how images and text encouraged the reader to behave as a connoisseur of all that is shown in its pages.

Key terms and concepts:

Edo period, also Tokugawa period: 1615-1868, administered by Tokugawa shogunate

City of Edo: shogun’s political capital, now known as Tokyo (Kyoto remained the official and Imperial capital)

Nihonbashi district: located in the merchant-artisan district, place from where all distances were measured; many publishers shops located there

Ukiyo-e: “pictures of the floating world”: genre designation including prints, books, and paintings. Most have as their subjects the “ukiyo.” Printed materials were produced by commercial publishers. Sheet prints were limited after the edict of 1804 to actors, beauties, sumo wrestlers, and famous places.

Ukiyo: the “floating world”: the world of the here and now, also the world of escapist (and fleeting) pleasures, located in such sites as the pleasure district, kabuki theaters, sumo tournaments, city entertainments

Ukiyo-e “quartet”: roles of publisher, artist/print designer, woodblock carver, printer; additional participants may include: copyist, writer, calligrapher, cover maker and binder (for books), among others.

Yoshiwara guidebooks (*saiken*): produced at the New Year and late summer/autumn, included information about the women that served in the brothels, including their names and ranks. A form of job printing, it seems, likely sponsored by the brothel owners. The book we will be looking closely at is:

Seirō bijin awase sugata kagami 「晴樓美人合姿鏡」, 1776 (安永 5)

Translated for this talk as: *The Mirror of Yoshiwara Beauties, Compared*

Might also be translated as: *The Mirror of the Figures of the Beauties of the Azure Towers, Compared*

Many other variations, including: *A Mirror of Beauties of the Green Houses*)

Published by Tsutaya Jūzaburō and Yamazaki Kinbei

Illustrations by Kitao Shigemasa and Katsukawa Shunshō

Woodblocks carved by Inoue Shinshichi

Size: 28.1 x 18.7 (ōhon format)

Fukurotoji (bag) binding

Terms of the title:

Seirō, the Azure towers = Yoshiwara district, the licensed pleasure district for the city of Edo, located 2.5 miles to the north. Staffed by *yūjo* (遊女) (“women for play”), also known as *yūkun* (遊君) (“play gals”). Established first in the center of Edo, moved in the mid-17th century to the North of the city. Renowned and most idealized pleasure quarter in Japan. Had its own customs, rules, and rituals; for more, see, Cecilia Segawa Seigle’s book, *Yoshiwara: The Glittering World of the Japanese Courtesan*.

Bijin, beautiful people = (mostly) beautiful women – *bijinga* = pictures of beauties. “Beauties” (*bijin*): beautiful women, in this period, although earlier the term was also used for men. Often referred to the licensed courtesans, but might also include unlicensed courtesans, geisha, entertainers, tea-shop waitresses, shop girls, and others.

Awase, comparison or evaluation = signaling appraisal and ranking

Sugata, figure

Kagami, mirror

Publishers:

Yamazaki Kinbei: Location in central Edo, rights to color production, affiliations

-publisher, *Illustrated Book: Flowers of Edo (Ehon Azuma hana)*, 1768, illustrated by Shigemasa

-published two later books with Shunshō (1778, 1789)

Tsutaya Jūzaburō: Location outside the Great Gate of the Yoshiwara, guidebook purveyor, affiliations

-publisher, *A Thousand Cherry Trees at a Single Glance (Hitome senbon)*, 1774, illustrated by Shigemasa

-publisher, *guidebook*, 1776 with Shunshō

Inoue Shinshichi: woodblock carver

Kitao Shigemasa: founder of the Kitao school, artist known for prints and illustrated books

Katsukawa Shunshō: founder of the Katsukawa school, known for actor prints, paintings