

HYMN TO BEAUTY: THE ART OF UTAMARO

Highly popular during his lifetime, Kitagawa Utamaro (1753?–1806) enjoys international fame today as one of the most representative artists of ‘images of the floating world’ (*ukiyo-e*) in the late 1700s, a period often referred to as the golden age of Japanese woodblock prints. Yet very little is known about his family background and early childhood. He was born and lived in Edo (today’s Tokyo), the seat of the government and one of the most important cultural centres in the Tokugawa period (1603–1868).

Trained at first by Toriyama Sekien in the orthodox painting style of the Kano school, Utamaro was soon discovered by the influential and astute *ukiyo-e* publisher Tsutaya Jūzaburō. Under Tsutaya’s guidance, he rose quickly, achieving his first critical acclaim and commercial success with vibrant illustrations for sumptuously printed poetry anthologies and erotic books in the late 1780s.

In the early 1790s, Utamaro shifted his activity to ‘pictures of beautiful women’ (*bijinga*), one of the main and most profitable genres of *ukiyo-e*. His sensuous, passionate and technically outstanding images of women from all walks of life, depicted in a bust or half-length format (*ōkubi-e*), revolutionised the way women were portrayed in Japanese visual arts. The overwhelming influence of his style on his contemporaries and followers is evident in the works of Eishi, Eishō, Eisui, Eiryū, Chōki and Banki, who are included in this exhibition.

Viewers of Utamaro’s seductively alluring images may find resonance in Charles Baudelaire’s 1857 verse *Hymn to beauty*. The exhibition’s title takes its inspiration from this poem.

All works (except cat no 70) are from the collection of the Asian Art Museum, National Museums in Berlin.

HARMONY OF WORD AND IMAGE: DELUXE POETRY ANTHOLOGIES

Written in 31 syllables (divided into lines of 5-7-5-7-7 syllables), *kyōka* or 'crazy verse' are humorous verses laden with wordplay or parodies of classical *waka* ('poems in Japanese style'). In the mid 1780s, the entrepreneurial publisher Tsutaya Jūzaburō explored a new niche market for superbly illustrated and lavishly printed *kyōka* anthologies in Edo's growing number of poetry clubs of merchants, lower-ranking samurai and artists. Since these publications were privately commissioned to be circulated exclusively among the numerous literary circles, no cost was spared to ensure the highest artistic quality, allowing Tsutaya to hire outstanding block carvers and printers to work alongside the young Utamaro.

Between 1786 and 1790, Tsutaya and Utamaro produced no less than 13 luxuriously printed anthologies. Among these, *Picture-book: selected insects* of 1788 is acknowledged as the most successful example of the genre. The startling freshness of these anthologies – four of which are in this exhibition – lies in Utamaro's introduction of themes often found in classical Japanese paintings, such as naturalistic depictions of flora and fauna, scenes of courtly splendour or austere monochrome landscapes, into floating-world publications. His elegant brushwork and the elaborate printing techniques used for the illustrations balance the playful mood of the poems.

BEAUTY UP CLOSE: THE BUST PORTRAIT

The release of *Ten types in the physiognomic study of women* and *Ten classes of women's physiognomy* in c1792–93 marked a new chapter in the representation of women in Japanese visual arts. In these series, women of varied social status and ages are captured in a half-length format in an instant of movement and set against a plain background covered with white, shiny mica powder, which further enhances the iconic power of the portraits. Known as *ōkubi-e* (literally 'large-head pictures' or bust portraits), this compositional format was first developed in the 1770s for portraits of Kabuki actors, luring the public into believing that they were more directly engaged with their theatre idols. In these 'close-ups', Utamaro is able to capture a fleeting expression and mood, imbuing his subjects with a psychological depth rarely seen before in the portrayal of women in Japan.

The bust portrait became the favourite format for depicting women in the late 18th century. High-ranking courtesans, celebrated geisha and seductive shop-girls were the most sought-after models. Celebrated as fashion trendsetters and icons of feminine beauty, these women were like 'billboard girls' with their representation in prints serving as publicity for themselves and for the commercial establishments with which they were affiliated.

A REALM OF DESIRE AND PLEASURE: THE YOSHIWARA

Opened for business in 1618, Edo's unique licensed pleasure quarter was known as the Yoshiwara, or later Shin-Yoshiwara ('New Yoshiwara') after it was relocated to the outskirts of the city in 1657. However, the area was often referred to by the more poetic name *Seirō* ('Green houses'). Established as part of the government's policy of regulating prostitution, it became a popular venue for gatherings of authors, poets and artists.

Brothel operators and shop owners went to great lengths to both promote the quarter's exoticism as an exclusive world that had its own etiquette, mores, language and festivals, and to market the women. By presenting the aloof courtesans and their entourages as ideals of beauty, fashion icons and accomplished performers of high-brow arts such as classical literature, painting, calligraphy and *ikebana*, and glamorising their life in the quarter, *ukiyo-e* artists helped bolster the illusion of the Yoshiwara as a realm of sexual fantasy and allure.

The fictional writing and imagery of the floating world largely ignored the harsh realities of courtesans' lives as indentured sex workers suffering violence, deprivation and disease. The prints of Utamaro and his contemporaries depicting life in the Yoshiwara are not meant as documentary records, but as images that market desire.

PASSION IMAGINED: CELEBRATED LOVERS

On the puppet and Kabuki stages and in ballads and recitatives from the late 17th century onwards, one popular theme involved stories, often based on actual events, of lovers whose illicit passions created unsolvable conflicts between their personal feelings and social obligations, leading to the drastic choice of dying together rather than living apart. These stories emerged as a subject in *ukiyo-e* prints at the beginning of the 1700s. Between 1797 and his death in 1806, Utamaro designed over 100 single-sheet prints depicting tragic lovers in moments of despair or subdued passion or on their journey towards death.

While many of his predecessors and contemporaries employed the full-length format to show the lovers as performed by Kabuki actors or as figures in a puppet play, Utamaro introduced an innovative approach. By capturing the couples in the bust-portrait format, and placing them in front of a blank background bare of props, he put the emphasis on the emotional and psychological aspects of the characters, engaging the viewer more intimately. Depictions of lovers also provided Utamaro with an opportunity to visualise passion and physical contact between the sexes, which was normally reserved for erotic imagery, and offered him the rare chance to portray men as equally appealing as their female counterparts.

BEAUTY OF THE QUOTIDIAN

The distinctive 'Utamaro style' reached its peak in the mid 1790s, prompting numerous publishers to seek the artist's collaboration. In response to their demands, Utamaro expanded his repertoire to encompass women of middle-class households. In vibrant colour and with vivacity, he depicted townswomen engaged in mundane chores like cooking, mending clothes, dressing hair or doting on their children, and imbued them with a grace and an understated erotic appeal that matched the courtesans of the pleasure quarter. In the Confucian system of Edo-period Japan, these women were socially, politically and culturally marginalised. Through his images, Utamaro reminded the male world, even if temporarily, of their existence and their desirability.

Female workers in the countryside also captured Utamaro's imagination. Intricate multiple-sheet prints depicting gracious, appealing women engaged in sericulture (silk production) or diving for abalone idealised their sometimes strenuous, even dangerous occupations. The images nurtured the nostalgic feelings of many city-dwellers for an idyllic rural life and were therefore greatly popular.

This gradual shift towards depicting ordinary people might have resulted, in part, from government edicts that led to the decline of the pleasure quarter and the cult of the courtesans from the mid 1790s.

DOTING MOTHERS, TREASURED SONS

Compositions featuring children as a primary subject flourished in Japanese art after the mid 1700s, and Utamaro is credited as one of the most prolific artists in this genre. Whether involving realistic settings or figures of legend such as the wonder boy Kintarō and his foster mother Yamauba, Utamaro's designs of mothers and children – mostly boys – differ greatly from those of his peers in that he depicts the physical contact between the two with a degree of intimacy rarely seen in *ukiyo-e*, except in its erotic imagery. This subject gave Utamaro a plausible reason to abandon decorum without transgressing censorship laws in order to represent the fundamental human need for physical and emotional contact. Like no other artist, Utamaro understood how to use seemingly innocuous scenes to allude to erotic liaisons between men and women.

The precociously sensuous boys that recur in *ukiyo-e* have been referred to as 'Trojan babies' – surrogate bodies that enabled the male gaze to enact a fantasy of unrivalled possession of a beautiful, devoted woman. In contrast to boys, who were often pictured as recipients of adoration, girls usually appeared as older, working children, particularly as courtesans' attendants, reflecting expectations that girls shoulder the responsibilities of adulthood at an early age.